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BY

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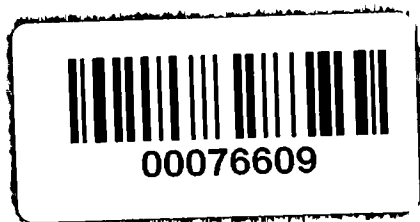
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CHAPTER I.

THE time passed, and it was eleven days since Zoroaster had set out. The king and Nehushta had continued to meet in the garden as before, and neither had ever referred to the day when the torrent of his heart had been suddenly let loose. The hours sped quietly and swiftly, without any event of importance. Only the strange bond, half friendship and half love, had grown stronger than before; and Nehushta wondered how it was that she could love two men so well, and yet so differently. Indeed they were very different men. She loved Zoroaster, and yet it sometimes seemed as though he would more properly have filled the place of a friend than of a lover. Darius she had accepted as her friend, but there were moments when she almost forgot that he was not something

more. She tried to think of her meeting with Zoroaster, whether it would be like former meetings,—whether her heart would beat more strongly, or not beat at all when her lips touched his as of old. Her judgment was utterly disturbed and her heart no longer knew itself. She gave herself over to the pleasure of the king's society in the abandonment of the moment, half foreseeing that some great change was at hand, over which she could exercise no control.

The sun was just risen, but the bridge over the quickly flowing Choaspes was still in the shadow cast over the plain by the fortress and the palace, when two horsemen appeared upon the road from Nineveh, riding at full gallop, and, emerging from the blue mist that still lay over the meadows, crossed the bridge and continued at full speed towards the ascent to the palace.

The one rider was a dark, ill-favoured man, whose pale flaccid cheeks and drooping form betrayed the utmost fatigue. A bolster was bound across the withers of his horse and another on

the croup, so that he sat as in a sort of chair, but he seemed hardly able to support himself even with this artificial assistance, and his body swayed from side to side as his horse bounded over the sharp curve at the foot of the hill. His mantle was white with dust, and the tiara upon his head was reduced to a shapeless and dusty piece of crumpled linen, while his uncurled hair and tangled beard hung forward together in disorderly and dust-clotted ringlets.

His companion was Zoroaster, fair and erect upon his horse, as though he had not ridden three hundred farsangs in eleven days. There was dust indeed upon his mantle and garments, as upon those of the man he conducted, but his long fair hair and beard blew back from his face as he held his head erect to the breeze he made in riding, and the light steel cap was bright and burnished on his forehead. A slight flush reddened his pale cheeks as he looked upward to the palace, and thought that his ride was over and his errand accomplished. He was weary, almost

to death ; but his frame was elastic and erect still.

As they rode up the steep, the guards at the outer gate, who had already watched them for twenty minutes as they came up the road, mere moving specks under the white mist, shouted to those within that Zoroaster was returning, and the officer of the gate went at once to announce his coming to the king. Darius himself received the message, and followed the officer down the steps to the tower of the gateway, reaching the open space within, just as the two riders galloped under the square entrance and drew rein upon the pavement of the little court. The spearmen sprang to their feet and filed into rank as the cry came down the steps that the king was approaching, and Zoroaster leaped lightly from his horse, and bid Phraortes do likewise ; but the wretched Median could scarce move hand or foot without help, and would have fallen headlong, had not two stout spearmen lifted him to the ground, and held him upon his legs.

Darius marched quickly up to the pair and stood still, while Zoroaster made his brief salutation. Phraortes, who between deadly fatigue and deadly fear of his life, had no strength left in him, fell forward upon his knees as the two soldiers relaxed their hold upon his arms.

"Hail, king of kings! Live for ever!" said Zoroaster. "I have fulfilled thy bidding. He is alive."

Darius laughed grimly as he eyed the prostrate figure of the Median.

"Thou art a faithful servant, Zoroaster," he answered, "and thou ridest as the furies that pursue the souls of the wicked—as the devils of the mountains after a liar. He would not have lasted much farther, this bundle of sweating dust. Get up, fellow!" he said, touching Phraortes's head with his toe. "Thou liest grovelling there like a swine in a ditch."

The soldiers raised the exhausted man to his feet. The king turned to Zoroaster.

"Tell me, thou rider of whirlwinds," he said,

laughing, "will a man more readily tell the truth, or speak lies, when he is tired?"

"A man who is tired will do whichever will procure him rest," returned Zoroaster, with a smile.

"Then I will tell this fellow that the sooner he speaks the truth the sooner he may sleep," said the king. Going near to Zoroaster, he added in an undertone: "Before thou thyself retest, go and tell the queen privately that she send away her slaves, and await me and him thou hast brought in a few minutes. This fellow must have a little refreshment, or he will die upon the steps."

Zoroaster turned and went up the broad stairs, and threaded the courts and passages, and mounted to the terrace where he had first met Atossa before the king's apartments. There was no one there, and he was about to enter under the great curtain, when the queen herself came out and met him face to face. Though it was yet very early, she was attired with more than usual care, and

the faint colours of her dress and the few ornaments she wore, shone and gleamed brightly in the level beams of the morning sun. She had guessed that Zoroaster would return that day, and she was prepared for him.

As she came suddenly upon him, she gave a little cry, that might well have been feigned.

"What! Are you already returned?" she asked, and the joy her voice expressed was genuine. He looked so godlike as he stood there in the sunlight—her heart leaped for the joy of only seeing him.

"Yes—I bear this message from the Great King to the queen. The Great King commands that the queen send away her slaves, and await the king and him I have brought with me, in the space of a few minutes."

"It is well," answered Atossa. "There are no slaves here and I await the king." She was silent a moment. "Are you not glad to have come back?" she asked, presently.

"Yes," said Zoroaster, whose face brightened

quickly as he spoke. "I am indeed glad to be here again. Would not any one be glad to have finished such a journey?"

The queen stood with her back to the curtained doorway and could see down the whole length of the balcony to the head of the staircase. Zoroaster faced her and the door. As he spoke, Atossa's quick eyes caught sight of a figure coming quickly up the last steps of the stairway. She recognised Nehushta instantly, but no trembling of her lids or colouring of her cheek, betrayed that she had seen the approach of her enemy. She fixed her deep-blue eyes upon Zoroaster's, and gazing somewhat sadly, she spoke in low and gentle tones:

"The time has seemed long to me since you rode away, Zoroaster," she said.

Zoroaster, astonished at the manner in which she spoke, turned pale, and looked down coldly at her beautiful face. At that moment Nehushta stepped upon the smooth marble pavement of the balcony.

Still Atossa kept her eyes fixed on Zoroaster's.

"You answer me nothing?" she said in broken tones. Then suddenly, as though acting under an irresistible impulse, she threw her arms wildly about his neck and kissed him passionately again and again.

"Oh Zoroaster, Zoroaster, my beloved!" she cried, "you must never, never leave me again!" And again she kissed him, and fell forward upon his breast, holding him so tightly that, for a moment, he did not know which way to move. He put his hands upon her shoulders, to her waist—to try to push her from him. But it was in vain; she clung to him desperately and sobbed upon his breast.

In the sudden and fearful embarrassment in which he was placed, he did not hear a short, low groan far off behind him, nor the sound of quickly retreating steps upon the stairs. But Atossa heard and rejoiced fiercely; and when she looked up, Nehushta was gone, with the incurable wound in her breast.

Atossa suddenly let her arms fall from the warrior's neck, looked into his eyes once, and then, with a short, sharp cry, she buried her face in her hands and leaned back against the door-post by the heavy striped curtain.

"Oh, my God! What have I done?" she moaned.

Zoroaster stood for one moment in hesitation and doubt. It seemed as though he had received a sudden revelation of numberless things he had never understood. He spoke quietly, at last, with a great effort, and his voice sounded kindly.

"I thank the good powers that I do not love thee—and I would that thou didst not love me. For I am the Great King's servant, faithful to death—and if I loved thee I should be a liar, and a coward, and the basest of all mankind. Forget, I pray thee, that thou hast spoken, and let me depart in peace. For the Great King is at hand, and thou must not suffer that he find thee weeping, lest he think thou fearest to meet Phraortes the Median face to face. Forget, I

pray thee—and forgive thy servant if he have done anything amiss.”

Atossa looked up suddenly. Her eyes were bright and clear, and there was not a trace of tears in them. She laughed harshly.

“I—weep before the king! You do not know me. Go, if thou wilt. Farewell, Zoroaster,”—her voice softened a little,—“farewell. It may be that you shall live, but it may be that you shall die, because I love you.”

Zoroaster bent his head in respectful homage, and turned and went his way. The queen looked after him, and as he disappeared upon the staircase, she began to smooth her head-dress and the locks of her golden hair, and for a moment, she smiled sweetly to herself.

“That was a mortal wound, well dealt,” she said aloud. But as she gazed out over the city, her face grew grave and thoughtful. “But I do love him,” she added softly, “I do—I do—I loved him long ago.” She turned quickly, as though fearing some one had overheard her.

“How foolish I am !” she exclaimed impatiently ; and she turned and passed away under the heavy curtain, leaving the long balcony once more empty,—save for the rush of a swallow that now, and then flew in between the pillars, and hovered for a moment high up by the cornice, and sped out again into the golden sunshine of the summer morning.

Zoroaster left Atossa with the hope of finding some means of seeing Nehushta. But it was impossible. He knew well that he could not so far presume as to go to her apartment by the lower passage where he had last seen her on the day of his departure for Ecbatana, and the slave whom he despatched from the main entrance of the women’s part of the palace returned with the brief information that Nehushta was alone in her chamber, and that no one dared disturb her.

Worn out with fatigue and excitement, and scarcely able to think connectedly upon the strange event of the morning, Zoroaster wearily resigned himself to seeing Nehushta at a later

hour, and entering his own cool chamber, lay down to rest. It was evening when he awoke.

Meanwhile the king commanded that Phraortes should be fed and refreshed, and immediately brought to the queen's apartment. Half an hour after Zoroaster had left her, Atossa was in the chamber which was devoted to her toilet. She sat alone before her great silver mirror, calmly awaiting the turn of events. Some instinct had told her that she would feel stronger to resist an attack in the sanctuary of her small inner room, where every object was impregnated with her atmosphere, and where the lattices of the two windows were so disposed that she would be able to see the expression of her adversaries without exposing her own face to the light.

She leaned forward and looked closely at herself in the glass, and with a delicate brush of camel's hair smoothed one eyebrow that was a little ruffled. It had touched Zoroaster's tunic when she threw herself upon his breast; she looked at herself with a genuine artistic pleasure, and smiled.

Before long she heard the sound of leathern shoes upon the pavement outside, and the curtain was suddenly lifted. Darius pushed Phraortes into the room by the shoulders and made him stand before the queen. She rose and made a salutation, and then sat down again in her carved chair. The king threw himself upon a heap of thick, hard cushions that formed a divan on one side of the room, and prepared to watch attentively the two persons before him.

Phraortes, trembling with fear and excessive fatigue, fell upon his knees before Atossa, and touched the floor with his forehead.

"Get upon thy feet, man," said the king shortly, "and render an account of the queen's affairs."

"Stay," said Atossa, calmly, "for what purpose has the Great King brought this man before me?"

"For my pleasure," answered Darius. "Speak fellow! Render thy account, and if I like not the manner of thy counting, I will crucify thee."

"The king liveth for ever," said Phraortes feebly, his flaccid cheeks trembling, as his limbs moved uneasily.

"The queen also liveth for ever," remarked Darius. "What is the state of the queen's lands at Ecbatana?"

At this question Phraortes seemed to take courage, and began a rapid enumeration of the goods, cattle and slaves.

"This year I have sown two thousand acres of wheat which will soon be ripe for the harvest. I have sown also a thousand acres with other grain. The fields of water-melons are yielding with amazing abundance since I caused the great ditches to be dug last winter towards the road. As for the fruit trees and the vine lands, they are prospering; but at present we have not had rain to push the first budding of the grapes. The olives will doubtless be very abundant this year, for last year there were few, as is the manner with that fruit. As for the yielding of these harvests of grain and wine and oil and fruit, I

doubt not that the whole sales will amount to an hundred talents of gold."

"Last year they only yielded eighty-five," remarked the queen, who had affected to listen to the whole account with the greatest interest. "I am well pleased, Phraortes. Tell me of the cattle and sheep—and of the slaves; whether many have died this year."

"There are five hundred head of cattle, and one hundred calves dropped in the last two months. From the scarcity of rain this year, the fodder has been almost destroyed, and there is little hay from the winter. I have, therefore, sent great numbers of slaves with camels to the farther plains to eastward, whence they return daily with great loads of hay—of a coarse kind, but serviceable. As for the flocks, they are now pasturing for the summer upon the slopes of the Zagros mountains. There were six thousand head of sheep and two thousand head of goats at the shearing in the spring, and the wool is already sold for eight talents. As for the slaves, I have

provided for them after a new fashion. There were many young men from the captives that came after the war two years ago. For these I have purchased wives of the dealers from Scythia. These Scythians sell all their women at a low price. They are hideous barbarians, speaking a strange tongue, but they are very strong and enduring, and I doubt not they will multiply exceedingly and bring large profits——”

“Thou art extraordinarily fluent in thy speech,” interrupted the king. “But there are details that the queen wishes to know. Thou art aware that in a frontier country like the province of Ecbatana, it is often necessary to protect the crops and the flocks from robbers. Hast thou therefore thought of arming any of these slaves for this purpose?”

“Let not the king be angry with his servant,” returned Phraortes, without hesitation. “There are many thousand soldiers of the king in Ecbatana, and the horsemen traverse the country continually. I have not armed any of the slaves, for I supposed we were safe in the protection of

the king's men. Nevertheless, if the Great King command me——”

“Thou couldst arm them immediately, I suppose?” interrupted Darius. He watched Atossa narrowly; her face was in the shadow.

“Nay,” replied Phraortes, “for we have no arms. But if the king will give us swords and spear-heads——”

“To what end?” asked Atossa. She was perfectly calm since she saw that there was no fear of Phraortes making a mistake upon this vital point. “What need have I of a force to protect lands that are all within a day's journey of the king's fortress? The idea of carrying weapons would make all the slaves idle and quarrelsome. Leave them their spades and their ploughs, and let them labour while the soldiers fight. How many slaves have I now, Phraortes?”

“There were, at the last return, fourteen thousand seven hundred and fifty-three men, ten thousand two hundred and sixteen women, and not less than five thousand children. But I expect——”

"What can you do with so many?" asked Darius, turning sharply to the queen.

"Many of them work in the carpet-looms," answered Phraortes. "The queen receives fifty talents yearly from the sales of the carpets."

"All the carpets in the king's apartments are made in my looms," said Atossa, with a smile. "I am a great merchant."

"I have no doubt I paid you dearly enough for them, too," said the king, who was beginning to be weary of the examination. He had firmly expected that either the Median agent, or the queen herself, would betray some emotion at the mention of arming the slaves, for he imagined that if Atossa had really planned any outbreak, she would undoubtedly have employed the large force of men she had at her disposal, by finding them weapons and promising them their liberty in the event of success.

He was disappointed at the appearance of the man Phraortes. He had supposed him a strong, determined man of imperious ways and turbulent

instincts, who could be easily led into revolution and sedition from the side of his ambition. He saw before him the traditional cunning, quick-witted merchant of Media, pale-faced and easily frightened; no more capable of a daring stroke of usurpation than a Jewish pedlar of Babylon. He was evidently a mere tool in the hands of the queen; and Darius stamped impatiently upon the floor when he thought that he had perhaps been deceived after all—that the queen had really written to Phraortes simply on account of her property, and that there was no revolution at all to be feared. Impulsive to the last degree, when the king had read the letter to Phraortes, his first thought had been to see the man for himself, to ask him a few questions and to put him at once to death if he found him untruthful. The man had arrived, broken with excessive fatigue and weak from the fearful journey; but under the very eye of the king, he had nevertheless given a clear and concise account of himself; and, though he betrayed considerable fear, he

gave no reason for supposing that what he said was not true. As for the queen, she sat calmly by, polishing her nails with a small instrument of ivory, occasionally asking a question, or making a remark, as though it were all the most natural occurrence in the world.

Darius was impetuous and fierce. His intuitive decisions were generally right, and he acted upon them instantly, without hesitation; but he had no cunning and little strategy. He was always for doing and never for waiting; and to the extreme rapidity of his movements he owed the success he had. In the first three years of his reign he fought nineteen battles and vanquished nine self-styled kings; but he never, on any occasion, detected a conspiracy, nor destroyed a revolution before it had broken out openly. He was often, therefore, at the mercy of Atossa and frequently found himself baffled by her power of concealing a subtle lie under the letter of truth, and by her supreme indifference and coldness of manner under the most trying cir-

cumstances. In his simple judgment it was absolutely impossible for any one to lie directly without betraying some hesitation, and each time he endeavoured to place Atossa in some difficult position, when she must, he thought, inevitably betray herself, he was met by her inexplicable calm; which he was forced to attribute to the fact that she was in the right—no matter how the evidence might be against her.

The king decided that he had made a mistake in the present instance and that Phraortes was innocent of any idea of revolution. He could not conceive how such a man should be capable of executing a daring stroke of policy. He determined to let him go.

“You ought to be well satisfied with the result of these accounts,” he said, staring hard at Atossa. “You see you know more of your affairs, and sooner, than you could have known if you had sent your letter. Let this fellow go, and tell him to send his accounts regularly in future, or he will have the pains of riding hither in haste to

deliver them. Thou mayest go now and take thy rest," he added, rising and pushing the willing Phraortes before him out of the room.*

"Thou hast done well. I am satisfied with thee, Phraortes," said Atossa coldly.

Once more the beautiful queen was left alone, and once more she looked at herself in the silver mirror, somewhat more critically than before. It seemed to her as she gazed and turned first one side of her face to the light and then the other, that she was a shade paler than usual. The change would have been imperceptible to any one else, but she noticed it with a little frown of disapproval. But presently she smoothed her brow and smiled happily to herself. She had sustained a terrible danger successfully.

She had hoped to have been able to warn Phraortes how to act; but, partly because the meeting had taken place so soon after his arrival, and partly because she had employed a portion of that brief interval with Zoroaster and in the scene she had suddenly invented and acted, she

had been obliged to meet her chief agent without a moment's preparation, and she knew enough of his cowardly character to fear lest he should betray her and throw himself upon the king's mercy, as a reward for the information he could give. But the crucial moment had passed successfully and there was nothing more to fear. Atossa threw herself upon the couch where the king had sat, and abandoned herself to the delicious contemplation of the pain she must have given in showing herself to Nehushta in Zoroaster's arms. She was sure that as the princess could not have seen Zoroaster's face, she must have thought that it was he who was embracing the queen. She must have suffered horribly, if she really loved him !

CHAPTER II.

WHEN Darius left the queen, he gave over the miserable Phraortes to the guards, to be cared for, and bent his steps towards the gardens. It was yet early, but he wished to be alone, and he supposed that Nehushta would come there before noon, as was her wont. Meanwhile, he wished to be free of the court and of the queen. Slowly he entered the marble gate and walked up the long walk of roses, plucking a leaf now and then, and twisting it in his fingers, scenting the fresh blossoms with an almost boyish gladness, and breathing in all the sweet warmth of the summer morning. He had made a mistake, and he was glad to be away, where he could calmly reflect upon the reason of his being deceived.

He wandered on until he came to the marble pavilion, and would have gone on to stray farther into the gardens, but that he caught sight of a woman's mantle upon the floor as he passed by the open doorway. He went up the few steps and entered.

Nehushta lay upon the marble pavement at her full length, her arms extended above her head. Her face was ghastly pale and her parted lips were white. She looked as one dead. Her white linen tiara had almost fallen from her heavy hair, and the long black locks streamed upon the stone in thick confusion. Her fingers were tightly clenched, and on her face was such an expression of agony, as Darius had never dreamed of, nor seen in those dead in battle.

The king started back in horror as he caught sight of the prostrate figure. He thought she was dead—murdered, perhaps—until, as he gazed, he saw a faint movement of breathing. Then he sprang forward, and kneeled, and raised her head upon his knee, and chafed her temples and her

hands. He could reach the little fountain as he knelt, and he gathered some water in his palm and sprinkled it upon her face.

At last she opened her eyes—then closed them wearily again—then opened them once more in quick astonishment, and recognised the king. She would have made an effort to rise, but he checked her, and she let her head sink back upon his knee. Still he chafed her temples with his broad, brown hand, and gazed with anxious tenderness into her eyes, that looked at him for a moment, and then wandered and then looked again.

“What is this?” she asked, vacantly, at last.

“I know not,” answered the king. “I found you here—lying upon the floor. Are you hurt?” he asked tenderly.

“Hurt? No—yes, I am hurt—hurt even to death,” she added suddenly. “Oh, Darius, I would I could tell you! Are you really my friend?”

She raised herself without his help and sat up.

The hot blood rushed back to her cheeks and her eyes regained their light.

"Can you doubt that I am your friend, your best friend?" asked the king.

Nehushta rose to her feet and paced the little hall in great emotion. Her hands played nervously with the golden tassels of her mantle, her head-dress had fallen quite back upon her shoulders, and the masses of her hair were let loose. From time to time she glanced at the king, who eyed her anxiously as he stood beside the fountain.

Presently she stopped before him, and very gravely fixed her eyes on him.

"I will tell you something," she said, beginning in low tones. "I will tell you this—I cannot tell you all. I have been horribly deceived, betrayed, made a sport of. I cannot tell you how—you will believe me, will you not? This man I loved—I love him not—has cast me off as an old garment, as a thing of no price—as a shoe that is worn out and that is not fit for his

feet to tread upon. I love him not—I hate him—oh, I love him not at all!”

Darius’s face grew dark and his teeth ground hard together, but he stood still, awaiting what she should say. But Nehushta ceased, and suddenly she began again to walk up and down, putting her hand to her temples, as though in pain. Once more she paused, and in her great emotion laid her two hands upon the shoulder of the king, who trembled at her touch, as though a strong man had struck him.

“You said you loved me, once,” said Nehushta, in short, nervous tones, almost under her breath. “Do you love me still?”

“Is it so long since I told you I loved you?” asked Darius, with a shade of bitterness, “Ah! do not tempt me—do not stir my sickness. Love you? Yea—as the earth loves the sun—as man never loved woman. Love you? Ay! I love you, and I am the most miserable of men.” He shook from head to foot with strong emotion, and the stern lines of his face darkened as he went

on speaking. "Yet, though I love you so, I cannot harm him,—for my great oath's sake I cannot—yet for you, almost I could. Ah Nehushta, Nehushta!" he cried passionately, "tempt me not! Ask me not this, for you can almost make a liar of the Great King if you will!"

"I tempt you not," answered the princess. "I will not that you harm a hair of his head. He is not worthy that you should lift the least of your fingers to slay him. But this I tell you——" she hesitated. The king in his violent excitement, as though foreseeing what she would say, seized her hands and held them tightly while he gazed into her eyes.

"Darius," she said, almost hurriedly, "if you love me, and if you desire it, I will be your wife."

A wild light broke from the king's eyes. He dropped her hands and stepped backwards from her, staring hard. Then, with a quick motion, he turned and threw himself upon the marble seat that ran around the hall, and buried his face and sobbed aloud.

Nehushta seemed to regain some of her calmness, when once she had said the fatal words. She went and knelt beside him and smoothed his brow and wild, rough hair. The great tears stained his dark cheek. He raised himself and looked at her and put one arm about her neck.

“Nehushta,” he whispered, “is it true?”

She bowed her head silently. Darius drew her towards him and laid her cheek upon his breast. His face bent down to hers, most tenderly, as though he would have kissed her. But suddenly he drew back, and turned his eyes away.

“No,” he said, as though he had regained the mastery over himself. “It is too much to ask—that I might kiss you! It is too much—too much—that you give me. I am not worthy that you should be my wife. Nay!” he cried, as she would not let him rise from his seat. “Nay, let me go, it is not right—it is not worthy—I must not see you any more. Oh, you have tempted me till I am too weak——”

“Darius, you are the noblest of men, the best

and bravest." Then with a sudden impulse it seemed to Nehushta that she really loved him. The majestic strength of Zoroaster seemed cold and meaningless beside the fervour of the brave young king, striving so hard to do right under the sorest temptation, striving to leave her free, even against her will. For the moment she loved him, as such women do, with a passionate impulse. She put her arms about him and drew him down to her.

"Darius, it is truth—I never loved you, but I love you now, for, of all living men, you have the bravest heart." She pressed a kiss hotly upon his forehead and her head sank upon his shoulder. For one moment the king trembled, and then, as though all resistance were gone from him, his arms went round her, locking with hers that held him, and he kissed her passionately.

When Zoroaster awoke from his long sleep it was night. He had dreamed evil dreams, and he woke with a sense of some great disaster impending. He heard unwonted sounds in the hall out-

side his chamber, and he sprang to his feet and called one of the soldiers of his guard.

"What is happening?" asked Zoroaster quickly.

"The Great King, who lives for ever, has taken a new wife to-day," answered the soldier, standing erect, but eyeing Zoroaster somewhat curiously. Zoroaster's heart sank within him.

"What? Who is she?" he asked, coming nearer to the man.

"The new queen is Nehushta—the Hebrew princess," answered the spearman. "There is a great banquet, and a feast for the guard, and much food and wine for the slaves——"

"It is well," answered Zoroaster. "Go thou, and feast with the rest."

The man saluted, and left the room. Zoroaster remained standing alone, his teeth chattering together and his strong limbs shaking beneath him. But he abandoned himself to no frenzy of grief, nor weeping; one seeing him would have said he was sick of a fever. His blue eyes stared hard at the lamp-light and his face was white, but he

did not so much as utter an exclamation, nor give one groan. He went and sat down upon a chair and folded his hands together, as though waiting for some event. But nothing happened ; no one came to disturb him in his solitude, though he could hear the tramping feet and the unceasing talk of the slaves and soldiers without. In the vast palace, where thousands dwelt, where all were feasting or talking of the coming banquet, Zoroaster was utterly alone.

At last he rose, slowly, as though with an effort, and paced twice from one end of the room to the other. Upon a low shelf on one side, his garments were folded together, while his burnished cuirass and helmet and other arms which he had not worn upon his rapid journey to Ecbatana, hung upon nails in the wall above. He looked at all these things and turned the clothes over piece by piece, till he had found a great dark mantle and a black hood such as was worn in Media. These he put on, and beneath the cloak he girded a broad, sharp knife about him. Then

wrapping himself closely round with the dark-coloured stuff and drawing the hood over his eyes, he lifted the curtain of his door and went out, without casting a look behind him.

In the crowd of slaves he passed unnoticed; for the hall was but dimly lighted by a few torches, and every one's attention was upon the doings of the day and the coming feast.

Zoroaster soon gathered from the words he heard spoken, that the banquet had not yet begun, and he hastened to the columned porch through which the royal party must pass on the way to the great hall which formed the centre of the main building. Files of spearmen, in their bronze breastplates and scarlet and blue mantles, lined the way, which was strewn with yellow sand and myrtle leaves and roses. At every pillar stood a huge bronze candlestick, in which a torch of wax and fir-gum burned, and flared, and sent up a cloud of half pungent, half aromatic smoke. Throngs of slaves and soldiers pressed close behind the lines of spearmen, elbowing each

other with loud jests and surly complaints, to get a better place, a sea of moving, shouting, gesticulating humanity. Zoroaster's great height and broad shoulders enabled him easily to push to the front, and he stood there, disguised and unknown, peering between the heads of two of his own soldiers to obtain the first view of the procession as it came down the broad staircase at the end of the porch.

Suddenly the blast of deep-toned trumpets was heard in the distance, and silence fell upon the great multitude. With a rhythmic sway of warlike tone the clangour rose and fell, and rose again as the trumpeters came out upon the great staircase and began to descend. After them came other musicians, whose softer instruments began to be heard in harmony with the resounding bass of the horns, and then, behind them, came singers, whose strong, high voices completed the full burst of music that went before the king.

With measured tread the procession advanced. There were neither priests, nor sacrificers, nor

any connected with any kind of temple; but after the singers came two hundred noble children clad in white, bearing long garlands of flowers that trailed upon the ground, so that many of the blossoms were torn off and strewed the sand.

But Zoroaster looked neither on the singers, nor on the children. His eyes were fixed intently on the two figures that followed them—Darius, the king, and Nehushta, the bride. They walked side by side, and the procession left an open space, ten paces before and ten paces behind the royal pair. Darius wore the tunic of purple and white stripes, the mantle of Tyrian purple on his shoulders and upon his head the royal crown of gold surrounded the linen tiara; his left hand, bare and brown and soldier-like, rested upon the golden hilt of his sword, and in his right, as he walked, he carried a long golden rod surmounted by a ball, twined with myrtle from end to end. He walked proudly forward, and as he passed, many a spearman thought with pride that the Great King looked as much a soldier as he himself.

By his left side came Nehushta, clad entirely in cloth of gold, while a mantle of the royal purple hung down behind her. Her white linen tiara was bound round with myrtle and roses, and in her hands she bore a myrtle bough.

Her face was pale in the torchlight, but she seemed composed in manner, and from time to time she glanced at the king with a look which was certainly not one of aversion.

Zoroaster felt himself growing as cold as ice as they approached, and his teeth chattered in his head. His brain reeled with the smoke of the torches, the powerful, moving tones of the music and the strangeness of the whole sight. It seemed as though it could not be real. He fixed his eyes upon Nehushta, but his face was shaded all around by his dark hood. Nevertheless, so intently did he gaze upon her that, as she came near, she felt his look, as it were, and, searching in the crowd behind the soldiers, met his eyes. She must have known it was he, even under the disguise that hid his features, for, though she

walked calmly on, the angry blood rushed to her face and brow, overspreading her features with a sudden, dark flush.

Just as she came up to where Zoroaster stood, he thrust his covered head far out between the soldiers. His eyes gleamed like coals of blue fire and his voice came low, with a cold, clear ring, like the blade of a good sword striking upon a piece of iron.

“Faithless!”

That was all he said, but all around heard the cutting tone, that neither the voices of the singers, nor the clangour of the trumpets could drown.

Nehushta drew herself up and paused for one moment, and turned upon the dark-robed figure a look of such unutterable loathing and scorn as one would not have deemed could be concentrated in a human face. Then she passed on.

The two spearmen turned quickly upon the man between them, who had uttered the insult against the new queen, and laid hold of him roughly by the shoulders. A moment more and

his life would have been ended by their swords. But his strong, white hands stole out like lightning, and seized each soldier by the wrist, and twisted their arms so suddenly and with such furious strength, that they cried aloud with pain and fell headlong at his feet. The people parted for a space in awe and wonder, and Zoroaster turned, with his dark mantle close drawn around him, and strode out through the gaping crowd.

"It is a devil of the mountains!" cried one.

"It is Ahriman himself!" said another.

"It is the soul of the priest of Bel whom the king slew at Babylon!"

"It is the Evil Spirit of Cambyses!"

"Nay," quoth one of the spearmen, rubbing his injured hand, "it was Zoroaster, the captain. I saw his face beneath that hood he wore."

"It may be," answered his fellow. "They say he can break a bar of iron, as thick as a man's three fingers, with his hand. But I believe it was a devil of the mountains."

But the procession marched on, and long before

the crowd had recovered enough from its astonishment to give utterance to these surmises, Zoroaster had passed out of the porch and back through the deserted courts, and down the wide staircase to the palace gate, and out into the quiet, starlit night, alone and on foot.

He would have no compromise with his grief; he would be alone with it. He needed not mortal sympathy and he would not have the pity of man. The blow had struck home with deadly certainty and the wound was such as man cannot heal, neither woman. The fabric of happiness, which in a year he had built himself, was shattered to its foundation, and the fall of it was fearful. The ruin of it reached over the whole dominion of his soul and rent all the palace of his body. The temple that had stood so fair, whither his heart had gone up to worship his beloved one, was destroyed and utterly beaten to pieces; and the ruin of it was as a heap of dead bones, so loathsome in decay, that the eyes of his spirit turned in horror and disgust

from the inward contemplation of so miserable a sight.

Alone and on foot, he went upon his dreary way, dry-eyed and calm. There was nothing left of all his past life that he cared for. His armour hung in his chamber in the palace and with it he left the Zoroaster he had known—the strong, the young, the beautiful; the warrior, the lover, the singer of sweet songs, the smiter of swift blows, the peerless horseman, the matchless man. He who went out alone into the great night, was a moving sorrow, a horror of grief made visible as a walking shadow among things real, a man familiar already with death as with a friend, and with the angel of death as with a lover.

Alone—it was a beginning of satisfaction to be away from all the crowd of known and unknown faces familiar to his life—but the end and attainment of satisfaction could only come when he should be away from himself, from the heavy body that wearied him, and from the heavier soul that was crushed with itself as with

a burden. For sorrow was his companion from that day forth, and grief undying was his counsellor.

Ah God! She was so beautiful and her love was so sweet and strong! Her face had been as the face of an angel, and her virgin-heart as the innermost leaves of the rose that are folded together in the bud before the rising of the sun. Her kiss was as the breath of spring that gladdens the earth into new life, her eyes as crystal wells, from the depths whereof truth rose blushing to the golden light of day. Her lips were so sweet that a man wondered how they could ever part, till, when they parted, her gentle breath bore forth the music of her words, that was sweeter than all created sounds. She was of all earthly women the most beautiful—the very most lovely thing that God had made; and of all mortal women that have loved, her love had been the purest, the gentlest, the truest. There was never woman like to her, nor would be again.

And yet—scarce ten days had changed her,

had so altered and disturbed the pure elements of her wondrous nature that she had lied to herself and lied to her lover the very lie of lies—for what? To wear a piece of purple of a richer dye than other women wore, to bind her hair with a bit of gold, to be called a queen—a queen forsooth! when she had been from her birth up the sovereign queen of all created women!

The very lie of lies! Was there ever such a monstrous lie since the world first learned the untruths of the serpent's wisdom? Had she not sworn and promised, by the holiness of her God, to love Zoroaster for ever? For ever. O word, that had meant heaven, and now meant hell!—that had meant joy without any end and peace and all love!—that meant now only pain eternal, and sorrow, and gnawing torment of a wound that would never heal! O Death, that yesterday would have seemed Life for her! O Life, that to-day, by her, was made the Death of deaths!

Emptiness of emptiness—the whole world one hollow cavern of vanity—lifeless and lightless,

where the ghosts of the sorrows of men moan dismally, and the shadows of men's griefs scream out their wild agony upon the ghastly darkness ! Night, through which no dawn shall ever gleam, fleet and fair, to touch with rosy fingers the eyes of a dead world and give them sight ! Winter, of unearthly cold, that through all the revolving ages of untiring time, shall never see the face of another spring, nor feel its icy veins thawing with the pulses of a forgotten life, quickened from within with the thrilling hope of a new and glorious birth !

Far out upon the southern plain Zoroaster lay upon the dew-wet ground and gazed up into the measureless depths of heaven, where the stars shone out like myriads of jewels set in the dark mantle of night.

Gradually, as he lay, the tempest of his heart subsided, and the calm of the vast solitude descended upon him, even as the dew had descended upon the earth. His temples ceased to throb with the wild pulse that sent lightnings through

his brain at every beat, and from the intensity of his sorrow, his soul seemed to float upwards to those cool depths of the outer firmament where no sorrow is. His eyes grew glassy and fixed, and his body rigid in the night-dews; and his spirit, soaring beyond the power of earthly forces to weigh down its flight, rose to that lofty sphere where the morning and the evening are but one eternal day, where the mighty unison of the heavenly chorus sends up its grand plain-chant to God Most High.

CHAPTER III.

FAR in the wild mountains of the south, where a primeval race of shepherds pastures its flocks of shaggy goats upon the scanty vegetation of rocky slopes, there is a deep gorge whither men seldom penetrate, and where the rays of the sun fall but for a short hour at noonday. A man may walk, or rather climb, along the side of the little stream that rushes impetuously down among the black rocks, for a full hour and a half before he reaches the end of the narrow valley. Then he will come upon a sunken place, like a great natural amphitheatre, the steep walls of boulders rising on all sides to a lofty circle of dark crags. In the midst of this open space a spring rises suddenly from beneath a mass of black stone, with a rushing, gurgling sound, and makes a

broad pool, whence the waters flow down in a little torrent through the gorge till they emerge far below into the fertile plain and empty themselves into the Araxes, which flows by the towers and palaces of lordly Stakhar, more than two days' journey from the hidden circle in the mountains.

It would have been a hard thing to recognise Zoroaster in the man who sat day after day beside the spring, absorbed in profound meditation. His tall figure was wasted almost to emaciation by fasting and exposure ; his hair and beard had turned snow-white, and hung down in abundant masses to his waist, and his fair young face was pale and transparent. But in his deep-blue eyes there was a light different from the light of other days—the strange calm fire of a sight that looks on wondrous things, and sees what the eyes of men may not see, and live.

Nearly three years had passed since he went forth from the palace of Shushan, to wander southwards in search of a resting-place, and he

was but three-and-thirty years of age. But between him and the past there was a great gulf—the interval between the man and the prophet, between the cares of mortality and the divine calm of the higher life.

From time to time indeed, he ascended the steep path he had made among the stones and rocks, to the summit of the mountain; and there he met one of the shepherds of the hills, who brought him once every month a bag of parched grain and a few small, hard cheeses of goats' milk; and in return for these scanty provisions, he gave the man each time a link from the golden chain he had worn and which was still about his neck when he left the palace. Three-and-thirty links were gone since he had come there, and the chain was shorter by more than half its length. It would last until the thousand days were accomplished, and there would still be much left. Auramazda, the All-Wise, would provide.

Zoroaster sat by the spring and watched the

crystal waters sparkle in the brief hour of sunshine at noonday, and turn dark and deep again when the light was gone. He moved not through the long hours of day, sitting as he had sat in that place now for three years, neither scorched by the short hours of sunlight, nor chilled by winter's frost and snow. The wild long-haired sheep of the mountain came down to drink at noon, and timidly gazed with their stupid eyes at the immovable figure; and at evening the long-bodied, fierce-eyed wolves would steal stealthily among the rocks and come and snuff the ground about his feet, presently raising their pointed heads with a long howl of fear, and galloping away through the dusk in terror, as though at something unearthly.

And when at last the night was come, Zoroaster arose and went to the spot where the rocks, overhanging together, left a space through which one might enter; and the white-haired man gave one long look at the stars overhead, and disappeared within.

There was a vast cave, the roof reaching high up in a great vault; the sides black and polished, as though smoothed by the hands of cunning workmen; the floor a bed of soft, black sand, dry and even as the untrodden desert. In the midst, a boulder of black rock lay like a huge ball, and upon its summit burned a fire that was never quenched, and that needed no replenishing with fuel. The tall pointed flame shed a strangely white light around, that flashed and sparkled upon the smooth black walls of the cavern, as though they were mirrors. The flame also was immovable; it neither flickered, nor rose, nor fell; but stood as it were a spear-head of incandescent gold upon the centre of the dark altar. There was no smoke from that strange fire, nor any heat near it, as from other fires.

Then Zoroaster bent and put forth his forefinger and traced a figure upon the sand, which was like a circle, save that it was cut from north-west to south-east by two straight lines, and from north-east to south-west by two straight

lines; and at each of the four small arcs, where the straight lines cut the circumference of the great circle, a part of a smaller circle outside the great one united the points over each other. And upon the east side, toward the altar, the great circle was not joined, but open for a short distance.¹

When the figure was traced, Zoroaster came out from it and touched the black rock whereon the fire burned; and then he turned back and entered the circle, and with his fingers joined it where it was open on the east side through which he had entered. And immediately, as the circle was completed, there sprung up over the whole line he had traced a soft light; like that of the fire, but less strong. Then Zoroaster lay down upon his back, with his feet to the west and his head toward the altar, and he folded his hands upon his breast and closed his eyes. As he lay, his body became rigid and his face as the face of

¹ The Mazdayashnian Dakhma, or place of death. This figure represents the ground-plan of the modern Parsi Tower of Silence.

the dead ; and his spirit was loosed in the trance and freed from the bonds of earth, while his limbs rested.

Lying there, separated from the world, cut off within the circle of a symbolised death by the light of the universal agent,¹ Zoroaster dreamed dreams and saw visions.

His mind was first opened to the understanding of those broader conceptions of space and time of which he had read in the books of Daniel, his master. He had understood the principles then, but he had not realised their truth. He was too intimately connected with the life around him, to be able to see in the clearer light which penetrates with universal truth all the base forms of perishable matter.

Daniel had taught him the first great principles. All men, in their ignorance, speak of the infinities

¹ The term "universal agent" has been used in the mysticism of ages, to designate that subtle and all-pervading fluid, of which the phenomena of light, heat, electricity and vitality are considered to be but the grosser and more palpable manifestations.

of space and time as being those ideas which man cannot of himself grasp or understand. Man, they say, is limited in capacity ; he can, therefore, not comprehend the infinite. A greater fault than this could not be committed by a thinking being. For infinity being unending, it is incapable of being limited ; it rejects definition, which belongs, by its nature, to finite things. For definition means the placing of bounds, and that which is in-finite can have no bounds. The man, therefore, who seeks to bound what has no bounds, endeavours to define what is, by its nature, undefinable ; and finding that the one poor means which he has of conveying fallacious impressions of illusory things to his mind through his deadened senses, is utterly insufficient to give him an idea of what alone is real, he takes refuge in his crass ignorance and coarse grossness of language, and asserts boldly that the human mind is too limited in its nature to conceive of infinite space, or of infinite time.

Not only is the untrammelled mind of man

capable of these bolder conceptions, but even the wretched fool who sees in the material world the whole of what man can know, could never get so far as to think even of the delusive objects on which he pins his foolish faith, unless the very mind which he insults and misunderstands, had by its nature that infinite capacity of comprehension which, he says, exists not. For otherwise, if the mind be limited, there must be a definite limit to its comprehensive faculty, and it is easy to conceive that such a limit would soon become apparent to every student; as apparent as it is that a being, confined within three dimensions of space, cannot, without altering his nature, escape from these three dimensions, nor from the laws which govern matter having length, breadth and thickness alone, without the external fourth dimension, with its interchangeability of exterior and interior angles.

The very thought that infinite space cannot be understood, is itself a proof that the mind unconsciously realises the precise nature of such

infinity, in attributing to it at once the all-comprehensiveness from which there is no escape, in which all dimensions exist, and by virtue of which all other conceptions become possible; since this infinite space contains in itself all dimensions of existence—transitory, real and potential; and if the capacity of the mind is co-extensive with the capacity of infinite space, since it feels itself undoubtedly capable of grasping any limited idea contained in any portion of the illimitable whole, it follows that the mind is of itself as infinite as the space in which all created things have their transitory form of being, and in which all uncreated truths exist eternally. The mind is aware of infinity by that true sort of knowledge which is an intimate conviction not dependent upon the operation of the senses.

Gradually, too, as Zoroaster fixed his intuition upon the first main principle of all possible knowledge, he became aware of the chief cause—of the universal principle of vivifying essence, which pervades all things, and in which arises

motion as the original generator of transitory being. The great law of division became clear to him—the separation for a time of the universal agent into two parts, by the separation and reuniting of which comes light and heat, and the hidden force of life, and the prime rules of attractive action; all things that are accounted material. He saw the division of darkness and light, and how all things that are in the darkness are reflected in the light; and how the light which we call light is in reality darkness made visible, whereas the true light is not visible to the eyes that are darkened by the gross veil of transitory being. And as from the night of earth, his eyes were gradually opened to the astral day, he knew that the forms that move and have being in the night are perishable and utterly unreal; whereas the purer being which is reflected in the real light is true and endures for ever.

Then, by his knowledge and power, and by the light that was in him, he divided the portion

of the universal agent that was in the cave where he dwelt into two portions, and caused them to reunite in the midst upon the stone that was there; and the flame burned silently and without heat upon his altar, day and night, without intermission; and by the division of the power within him, he could divide the power also that was latent in other transitory beings, according to those laws which, being eternal, are manifested in things not eternal, but perishable.

And further, he meditated upon the seven parts of man, and upon their separation, and upon the difference of their nature.

For the first element of man is perishable matter.

And the second element of man is the portion of the universal agent which gives him life.

And the third element of man is the reflection of his perishable substance in the astral light, coincident with him, but not visible to his earthly eye.

The fourth element of man is made up of all

the desires he feels by his material senses. This part is not real being, nor transitory being, but a result.

The fifth element of man is that which says : "I am," whereby a man knows himself from other men ; and with it there is an intelligence of lower things, but no intelligence of things higher.

The sixth element is the pure understanding, eternal and co-extensive with all infinity of time and space—real, imperishable, invisible to the eye of man.

The seventh element is the soul from God.

Upon these things Zoroaster meditated long, and as his perishable body became weakened and emaciated with fasting and contemplation, he was aware that, at times, the universal agent ceased to be decomposed and recomposed in the nerves of his material part, so that his body became as though dead, and with it the fourth element which represents the sense of mortal desires ; and he himself, the three highest elements

of him,—his individuality, his intelligence and his soul,—became separated for a time from all that weighed them down; and his mind's eyes were opened, and he saw clearly in the astral light, with an intuitive knowledge of true things, and false.

And so, night after night, he lay upon the floor of his cavern, rigid and immovable; his body protected from all outer harmful influences by the circle of light he had acquired the power of producing. For though there was no heat in the flame, no mortal breathing animal could so much as touch it with the smallest part of his body without being instantly destroyed as by lightning. And so he was protected from all harm in his trances; and he left his body at will and returned to it, and it breathed again, and was alive.

So he saw into the past and into the present and into the future, and his soul was purified beyond the purity of man, and soared upwards, and dreamed of the eternal good and of the

endless truth ; and at last it seemed to him that he should leave his body in its trance, and never return to it, nor let it breathe again. For since it was possible thus to cast off mortality and put on immortality, it seemed to him that it was but a weariness to take up the flesh and wear it, when it was so easy to lay it down. Almost he had determined that he would then let death come, as it were unawares, upon his perishable substance, and remain for ever in the new life he had found.

But as his spirit thought in this wise, he heard a voice speaking to him, and he listened.

“One moment is as another, and there is no difference between one time and another time.

“One moment in eternity is of as great value as another moment, for eternity changes not, neither is one part of it better than another part.

“Though man be immortal as to his soul, he is mortal as to his body, and the time which his soul shall spend in his body is of as great worth to him as the time which he shall spend without it.

“Think not that by wilfully abandoning the body, even though you have the power and the knowledge to do so, you will escape from the state in which it has pleased God to put you.

“Rather shall your pain and the time of your suffering be increased, because you have not done with the body that which the body shall do.

“The life of the soul while it is in the body, has as much value as when it has left it. You shall not shorten the time of dwelling in the flesh.

“Though you know all things, you know not God. For though you know your body which is in the world, and the world which is in time, and time which is in space, yet your knowledge goeth no farther, for space and all that therein is, is in God.¹

“You have learned earthly things and heavenly things. Learn then that you shall not escape the laws of earth while you are on earth, nor the

¹ Hermes Trismegistus, *Pæmandres* xi. 2.

laws of heaven when you are in heaven. Lift up your heart to God, but do in the body those things which are of the body.

“There are other men put into the world besides you. If you leave the world, what does your knowledge profit other men? And yet it is to profit other men that God has put you into the world.

“And not you only, but every man. The labour of man is to man, and the labour of angels to angels. But the time of man is as valuable in the sight of God, as the time of angels.

“All things that are not accomplished in their time shall be left unaccomplished for ever and ever. If while you are in the flesh, you accomplish not the things of the flesh after the manner of your humanity, you shall enter into the life of the spirit as one blind, or maimed; for your part is not fulfilled.

“Wisdom is this. A man shall not care for the things of the world for himself, and his soul

shall be lifted and raised above all that is mean and perishable; but he shall perform his part without murmuring. He shall not forget the perishable things, though he soar to the imperishable.

“For man is to man as one portion of eternity to another; and as eternity would be imperfect if one moment could be removed, so also the earth would be imperfect if one man should be taken from it before his appointed time.

“If a man therefore take himself out of the world, he causes imperfection, and sins against perfection, which is the law of God.

“Though the world be in darkness, the darkness is necessary to the light. Though the world perish, and heaven perish not for ever, yet is the perishable necessary to the eternal.

“For the transitory and the unchangeable exist alike in eternity and are portions of it. And one moment is as another, and there is no difference between one time and another time.

“Go, therefore, and take up your body, and do

with it the deeds of the body among men ; for you have deeds to do, and unless they are done in their time, which is now, they will be unfulfilled for ever, and you will become an imperfect spirit.

“ The imperfect spirit shall be finally destroyed, for nothing that is imperfect shall endure. To be perfect all things must be fulfilled, all deeds done, in the season while the spirit is in darkness with the body. The deeds perish, and the body which doeth them, but the soul of the perfect man is eternal, and the reflection of what he has done, abides for ever in the light.

“ Hasten, for your time is short. You have learned all things that are lawful to be learnt, and your deeds shall be sooner accomplished.

“ Hasten, for one moment is as another, and there is no difference between the value of one time and of another time.

“ The moment which passes returns not, and the thing which a man should do in one time cannot be done in another time.”

The voice ceased, and the spirit of Zoroaster returned to his body in the cave, and his eyes opened. Then he rose, and standing within the circle, cast sand upon the portion towards the east; and so soon as the circle was broken, it was extinguished and there remained nothing but the marks Zoroaster had traced with his fingers upon the black sand.

He drew his tattered mantle around him, and went to the entrance of the cave, and passed out. And it was night.

Overhead, the full moon cast her broad rays vertically into the little valley, and the smooth black stones gleamed darkly. The reflection caught the surface of the little pool by the spring, and it was turned to a silver shield of light.

Zoroaster came forward and stood beside the fountain, and the glory of the moon fell upon his white locks and beard and on the long white hand he laid upon the rock.

His acute senses, sharpened beyond those of

men by long solitude and fasting, distinguished the step of a man far up the height on the distant crags, and his keen sight soon detected a figure descending cautiously, but surely, towards the deep abyss where Zoroaster stood. More and more clearly he saw him, till the man was near, and stood upon an overhanging boulder within speaking distance. He was the shepherd who, from time to time, brought food to the solitary mystic; and who alone, of all the goat-herds in those hills, would have dared to invade the sacred precincts of Zoroaster's retreat. He was a brave fellow, but the sight of the lonely man by the fountain awed him; it seemed as though his white hair emitted a light of its own under the rays of the moon, and he paused in fear lest the unearthly ascetic should do him some mortal hurt.

"Wilt thou harm me if I descend?" he called out timidly.

"I harm no man," answered Zoroaster. "Come in peace."

The active shepherd swung himself from the

boulder, and in a few moments he stood among the stones at the bottom, a few paces from the man he sought. He was a dark fellow, clad in goat-skins, with pieces of leather bound around his short, stout legs. His voice was hoarse, perhaps with some still unconquered fear, and his staff rattled as he steadied himself among the stones.

"Art not thou he who is called Zoroaster?" he asked.

"I am he," answered the mystic. "What wouldest thou?"

"Thou knowest that the Great King with his queens and his court are at the palace of Stakhar," replied the man. "I go thither from time to time to sell cheeses to the slaves. The Great King has made a proclamation that whosoever shall bring before him Zoroaster shall receive a talent of gold and a robe of purple. I am a poor shepherd—fearest thou to go to the palace?"

"I fear nothing. I am past fear these three years."

"Will the Great King harm thee, thinkest thou? Thou hast paid me well for my pains since I first saw thee, and I would not have thee hurt."

"No man can harm me. My time is not yet come."

"Wilt thou go with me?" cried the shepherd, in sudden delight. "And shall I have the gold and the robe?"

"I will go with thee. Thou shalt have all thou wouldest," answered Zoroaster. "Art thou ready? I have no goods to burden me."

"But thou art old," objected the shepherd, coming nearer. "Canst thou go so far on foot? I have a beast; I will return with him in the morning, and meet thee upon the height. I came hither in haste, being but just returned from Stakhar with the news."

"I am younger than thou, though my hair is white. I will go with thee. Lead the way."

He stooped and drank of the fountain in the moonlight, from the hollow of his hand.

Then he turned, and began to ascend the steep side of the valley. The shepherd led the way in silence, overcome between his awe of the man and his delight at his own good fortune.

CHAPTER IV.

It was now three years since Nehushta had been married to Darius, and the king loved her well. But often, in that time, he had been away from her, called to different parts of the kingdom by the sudden outbreaks of revolution which filled the early years of his reign. Each time he had come back in triumph, and each time he had given her some rich gift. He found indeed that he had no easy task to perform in keeping the peace between his two queens ; for Atossa seemed to delight in annoying Nehushta and in making her feel that she was but the second in the king's favour, whatever distinctions might be offered her. But Darius was just and was careful that Atossa should receive her due, neither more nor less.

Nehushta was glad when Zoroaster was gone.

She had suffered terribly in that moment when he had spoken to her out of the crowd, and the winged word had made a wound that rankled still. In those three years that passed, Atossa never undeceived her concerning the sight she had seen, and she still believed that Zoroaster had basely betrayed her. It was impossible, in her view, that it could be otherwise. Had she not seen him herself? Could any man do such an action who was not utterly base and heartless? She had, of course, never spoken to Darius of the scene upon the terrace. She did not desire the destruction of Atossa, nor of her faithless lover. Amid all the tender kindness the king lavished upon her, the memory of her first love endured still, and she could not have suffered the pain of going over the whole story again. He was gone, perhaps dead, and she would never see him again. He would not dare to set foot in the court. She remembered the king's furious anger against him, when he suspected that the hooded man in the procession was Zoroaster.

But Darius had afterwards said, in his usual careless way, that he himself would have done as much, and that for his oath's sake, he would never harm the young Persian. By the grace of Auramazda he swore, he was the king of kings and did not make war upon disappointed lovers!

Meanwhile, Darius had built himself a magnificent palace, below the fortress of Stakhar, in the valley of the Araxes, and there he spent the winter and the spring, when the manifold cares of the state would permit him. He had been almost unceasingly at war with the numerous pretenders who set themselves up for petty kings in the provinces. With unheard-of rapidity, he moved from one quarter of his dominions to another, from east to west, from north to south; but each time that he returned, he found some little disturbance going on at the court, and he bent his brows and declared that a parcel of women were harder to govern than all Media, Persia, and Babylon together.

Atossa wearied him with her suggestions.

"When the king is gone upon an expedition," she said, "there is no head in the palace. Otanes is a weak man. The king will not give me the control of the household, neither will he give it to any one else."

"There is no one whom I can trust," answered Darius. "Can you not dwell together in peace for a month?"

"No," answered Atossa, with her winning smile, "it is impossible; the king's wives will never agree among themselves. Let the king choose some one and make a head over the palace."

"Whom shall I choose?" asked Darius, moodily.

"The king had a faithful servant once," suggested Atossa.

"Have I none now?"

"Yea, but none so faithful as this man of whom I speak, nor so ready to do the king's bidding. He departed from Shushan when the king took Nehushta to wife——"

"Mean you Zoroaster?" asked Darius, bending

his brows, and eyeing Atossa somewhat fiercely. But she met his glance with indifference.

“The same,” she answered. “Why not send for him and make him governor of the palace? He was indeed a faithful servant—and a willing one.”

Still the king gazed hard at her face, as though trying to fathom the reason of her request, or at least to detect some scornful look upon her face to agree with her sneering words. But he was no match for the unparalleled astuteness of Atossa, though he had a vague suspicion that she wished to annoy him by calling up a memory which she knew could not be pleasant, and he retorted in his own fashion.

“If Zoroaster be yet alive I will have him brought, and I will make him governor of the palace. He was indeed a faithful servant—he shall rule you all and there shall be no more discord among you.”

And forthwith the king issued a proclamation that whosoever should bring Zoroaster before him

should receive a talent of gold and a robe of purple as a reward.

But when Nehushta heard of it she was greatly troubled; for Atossa began to tell her that Zoroaster was to return and to be made governor of the palace; but Nehushta rose and left her forthwith, with such a look of dire hatred and scorn that even the cold queen thought she had, perhaps, gone too far.

There were other reasons why the king desired Zoroaster's return. He had often wondered secretly how the man could so have injured Nehushta as to turn her love into hate in a few moments; but he had never questioned her. It was a subject neither of them could have approached, and Darius was far too happy in his marriage to risk endangering that happiness by any untoward discovery. Nehushta's grief and anger had been so genuine when she told him of Zoroaster's treachery that it had never occurred to him that he might be injuring the latter in marrying the princess, though his generous heart

had told him more than once, that Nehushta had married him half from gratitude for his kindness, and half out of anger with her false lover; but, capricious as she was in all other things, towards the king she was always the same, gentle and affectionate, though there was nothing passionate in her love. And now, the idea of seeing the man who had betrayed her installed in an official position in the palace, was terrible to her pride. She could not sleep for thinking how she should meet him, and what she should do. She grew pale and hollow-eyed with the anticipation of evil and all her peace went from her. Deep down in her heart there was yet a clinging affection for the old love, which she smothered and choked down bravely; but it was there nevertheless, a sleeping giant, ready to rise and overthrow her whole nature in a moment, if only she could wash away the stain of faithlessness which sullied his fair memory, and lift the load of dishonour which had crushed him from the sovereign place he had held in the dominion of her soul.

Darius was himself curious to ascertain the truth about Zoroaster's conduct. But another and a weightier reason existed for which he wished him to return. The king was disturbed about a matter of vital importance to his kingdom, and he knew that, among all his subjects, there was not one more able to give him assistance and advice than Zoroaster, the pupil of the dead prophet Daniel.

The religion of the kingdom was of a most uncertain kind. So many changes had passed over the various provinces which made up the great empire that, for generations, there had been almost a new religion for every monarch. Cyrus, inclining to the idolatry of the Phœnicians, had worshipped the sun and moon, and had built temples and done sacrifice to them and to a multitude of deities. Cambyses had converted the temples of his father into places of fire-worship, and had burnt thousands of human victims; rejoicing in the splendour of his ceremonies and in the fierce love of blood that grew upon him

as his vices obtained the mastery over his better sense. But under both kings the old Aryan worship of the Magians had existed among the people, and the Magians themselves had asserted, whenever they dared, their right to be considered the priestly caste, the children of the Brahmins of the Aryan house. Gomata—the false Smerdis—was a Brahmin, at least in name, and probably in descent; and during his brief reign the only decrees he issued from his retirement in the palace of Shushan, were for the destruction of the existing temples and the establishment of the Magian worship throughout the kingdom. When Darius had slain Smerdis, he naturally proceeded to the destruction of the Magi, and the streets of Shushan ran with their blood for many days. He then restored the temples and the worship of Auramazda, as well as he was able; but it soon became evident that the religion was in a disorganised state and that it would be no easy matter to enforce a pure monotheism upon a nation of men who, in their hearts, were Magians, nature-

worshippers ; and who, through successive reigns, had been driven by force to the adoration of strange idols. It followed that the people resisted the change and revolted whenever they could find a leader. The numerous revolutions, which cost Darius no less than nineteen battles, were, almost without exception, brought about in the attempt to restore the Magian worship in various provinces of the kingdom, and it may well be doubted whether, at any time in the world's history, an equal amount of blood was ever shed in so short a period in the defence of religious convictions.

Darius himself was a man who had the strongest belief in the power of Auramazda, the All-Wise God, and who did not hesitate to attribute all the evil in the world to Ahriman, the devil. He had a bitter contempt for all idolatry, nature-worship, and superstition generally, and he adhered in his daily life to the simple practices of the ancient Mazdayashnians. But he was totally unfitted to be the head of a religious movement ; and, although he had collected such of the priesthood as

seemed most worthy, and had built them temples and given them privileges of all kinds, he was far from satisfied with their mode of worship. He could not frame a new doctrine, but he had serious doubts whether the ceremonies his priests performed were as simple and religious as he wished them to be. The chants, long hymns of endless repetition and monotony, were well enough, perhaps; the fire that was kept burning perpetually was a fitting emblem of the sleepless wisdom and activity of the Supreme Being in overcoming darkness with light. But the boundless intoxication into which the priests threw themselves by the excessive drinking of the Haoma, the wild and irregular acts of frenzy by which they expressed their religious fervour when under the influence of the subtle drink, were adjuncts to the simple purity of the bloodless sacrifice which disgusted the king, and he hesitated long as to some reform in these matters. The oldest Mazdayashnians declared that the drinking of Haoma was an act, at once pleasing to God

and necessary to stimulate the zeal of the priests in the long and monotonous chanting, which would otherwise soon sink to a mere perfunctory performance of a wearisome task. The very repetition which the hymns contained seemed to prove that they were not intended to be recited by men not under some extraordinary influence. Only the wild madness of the Haoma drinker could sustain such an endless series of repeated prayers with fitting devotion and energy.

All this the king heard and was not satisfied. He attended the ceremonies with becoming regularity and sat through the performance of the rites with exemplary patience. But he was disgusted, and he desired a reform. Then he remembered how Zoroaster himself was a good Mazdayashnian, and how he had occupied himself with religious studies from his youth up, and how he had enjoyed the advantage of being the companion of Daniel, the Hebrew governor, whose grand simplicity of faith had descended, to some degree, upon his pupil. The Hebrews, Darius knew, were

a sober people of the strongest religious convictions, and he had heard that, although eating formed, in some way, a part of their ceremonies, there was no intoxication connected with their worship. Zoroaster, he thought, would be able to give him advice upon this point, which would be good. In sending for the man he would fulfil the double purpose of seeming to grant the queen's request, and at the same time, of providing himself with a sage counsellor in his difficulties. With his usual impetuosity, he at once fulfilled his purpose, assuring himself that Zoroaster must have forgotten Nehushta by this time, and that he, the king, was strong enough to prevent trouble if he had not.

But many days passed, and though the proclamation was sent to all parts of the kingdom, nothing was heard of Zoroaster. His retreat was a sure one and there was no possibility of his being found.

Atossa, who in her heart longed for Zoroaster's return, both because by his means she hoped to

bring trouble upon Nehushta, and because she still felt something akin to love for him, began to fear that he might be dead, or might have wandered out of the kingdom; but Nehushta herself knew not whether to hope that he would return, or to rejoice that she was to escape the ordeal of meeting him. She would have given anything to see him for a moment, to decide, as it were, whether she wished to see him, or not. She was deeply disturbed by the anxiety she felt and longed to know definitely what she was to expect.

She began to hate Stakhar with its splendid gardens and gorgeous colonnades, with its soft southern air that blew across the valley of roses all day long, wafting up a wondrous perfume to the south windows. She hated the indolent pomp in which she lived and the idle luxury of her days. Something in her hot-blooded Hebrew nature craved for the blazing sun and the sand-wastes of Syria, for the breath of the desert and for the burning heat of the wilderness. She had scarcely ever seen these things, for she had

sojourned during the one-and-twenty years of her life, in the most magnificent palaces of the kingdom, and amid the fairest gardens the hand of man could plant. But the love of the sun and of the sand was bred in the blood. She began to hate the soft cushions and the delicate silks and the endless flowers scenting the heavy air.

Stakhar¹ itself was a mighty fortress, in the valley of the Araxes, rising dark and forbidding from the banks of the little river, crowned with towers and turrets and massive battlements, that overlooked the fertile extent of gardens, as a stern schoolmaster frowning over a crowd of fair young children. But Darius had chosen the site of his palace at some distance from the stronghold; where the river bent suddenly round a spur of the mountain, and watered a wider extent of land. The spur of the hill ran down, by an easy gradation, into the valley; and beyond it the hills separated into the wide plain of Merodasht that stretched southward many farsangs to the southern

¹ Istakhar, called since the conquest of Alexander, Persepolis.

pass. Upon this promontory the king had caused to be built a huge platform which was ascended by the broadest flight of steps in the whole world, so easy of gradation that a man might easily have ridden up and then down again without danger to his horse. Upon the platform was raised the palace, a mighty structure resting on the vast columned porticoes and halls, built entirely of polished black marble, that contrasted strangely with the green slopes of the hills above and with the bright colours of the rose-gardens. Endless buildings rose behind the palace, and stretched far down towards the river below it. Most prominent of those above was the great temple of Auramazda, where the ceremonies were performed which gave Darius so much anxiety. It was a massive, square building, lower than the palace, consisting of stone walls surrounded by a deep portico of polished columns. It was not visible from the great staircase, being placed immediately behind the palace and hidden by it.

The walls and the cornices and the capitals of

the pillars were richly sculptured with sacrificial processions, and long trains of soldiers and captives, with great inscriptions of wedge-shaped letters, and with animals of all sorts. The work was executed by Egyptian captives ; and so carefully was the hard black marble carved and polished, that a man could see his face in the even surfaces, and they sent back the light like dark mirrors.

The valley above Stakhar was grand in its great outlines of crags and sharp, dark peaks, and the beetling fortress upon its rocky base, far up the gorge, seemed only a jutting fragment of the great mountain, thrown off and separated from the main chain by an earthquake, or some vast accident of nature. But from the palace itself the contrast of the views was great. On one side, the rugged hills, crag-crowned and bristling black against the north-western sky ; on the other, the great bed of rose-gardens and orangeries and cultivated enclosures filled the plain, till in the dim distance rose the level line of the soft blue

southern hills, blending mistily in the lazy light of a far-off warmth. It seemed as though on one side of the palace were winter, and on the other summer; on the one side cold, and on the other heat; on the one side rough strength, and on the other gentle rest.

But Nehushta gazed northward and was weary of the cold, and southward, and she wearied of the heat. There was nothing—nothing in it all that was worth one moment of the old sweet moonlit evenings among the myrtles at Ecbatana. When she thought, there was nothing of all her royal state and luxury that she would not readily give to have had Zoroaster remain faithful to her. She had put him away from her heart, driven him out utterly, as she believed; but now that he was spoken of again, she knew not whether she loved him a little in spite of all his unfaithfulness, or whether it was only the memory of the love she had felt before which stirred in her breast, and made her unconsciously speak his name when she was alone.

She looked back over the three years that were passed, and she knew that she had done her duty by the king. She knew also that she had done it willingly, and that there had been many moments when she said to herself that she loved Darius dearly. Indeed, it was not hard to find a reason for loving him, for he was brave and honest and noble in all his thoughts and ways ; and whatever he had been able to do to show his love for Nehushta, he had done. It was not the least of the things that had made her life pass so easily, that she felt daily how she was loved before her rival, and how, in her inmost heart, Atossa chafed at seeing Darius forsake her society for that of the Hebrew princess. If the king had wearied of her, Nehushta would very likely have escaped from the palace, and gone out to face any misfortunes the world might hold for her, rather than remain to bear the scoffing of the fair smiling woman she so hated. Or, she would have stolen in by night to where Atossa slept, and the wicked-looking Indian knife she wore, would have gone

down, swift and sure, to the very haft, into the queen's heart. She would not have borne tamely any slight upon her beauty or her claims. But, as it was, she reigned supreme. The king was just, and showed no difference in the state and attendance of the two queens, but it was to Nehushta he turned, when he drank deep at the banquet and pledged the loving cup. It was to Nehushta that he went when the cares of state were heavy and he needed counsel; and it was upon her lap he laid his weary head, when he had ridden far and fast for many days, returning from some hard-fought field.

But the queens hated each other with a fierce hatred, and when Darius was absent, their divisions broke out sometimes into something like open strife. Their guards buffeted each other in the courts, and their slave-women tore out each other's hair upon the stairways. Then, when the king returned, there reigned an armed peace for a time, which none dared break. But rumours of the disturbances that had taken place often

reached the royal ears, and Darius was angry and swore great oaths, but could do nothing ; being no wiser than many great men who have had to choose between the caprices of two women who hated each other.

Now the rumour went abroad that Zoroaster would return to the court ; and for a space, the two queens kept aloof, for both knew that if he came back, some mortal conflict would of necessity arise between them ; and each watched the other, and was cautious.

The days passed by, but no one answered the proclamation. No one had seen or heard of Zoroaster, since the night when he left the palace at Shushan. He had taken nothing with him, and had left no trace behind to guide the search. Many said he had left the kingdom ; some said he was dead in the wilderness. But Nehushta sighed and took little rest, for do what she would, she had hoped to see him once more.

CHAPTER V.

THE interior of the temple was lighted with innumerable lamps, suspended from the ceiling, of bronze and of the simplest workmanship, like everything which pertained to the worship of Auramazda. In the midst, upon a small altar of black stone, stood a bronze brazier, shaped like a goblet, wherein a small fire of wood burned quietly, sending up little wreaths of smoke, which spread over the flat ceiling and hung like a mist about the lamps; before the altar lay a supply of fuel—fine, evenly-cut sticks of white pinewood, piled in regular order in a symmetrical heap. At one extremity of the oblong hall stood a huge mortar of black marble, having a heavy wooden pestle, and standing upon a circular base, in which was cut a channel all around, with an

opening in the front from which the Haoma juice poured out abundantly when the fresh milk-weed was moistened and pounded together in the mortar. A square receptacle of marble received the fluid, which remained until it had fermented during several days, and had acquired the intoxicating strength for which it was prized, and to which it owed its sacred character. By the side of this vessel, upon a low marble table, lay a huge wooden ladle; and two golden cups, short and wide, but made smaller in the middle like a sand-glass, stood there also.

At the opposite end of the temple, before a marble screen which shielded the doorway, was placed a great carved chair of ebony and gold and silver, raised upon a step above the level of the floor.

It was already dark when the king entered the temple, dressed in his robes of state, with his sword by his side, his long sceptre tipped with the royal sphere in his right hand, and the many-pointed crown upon his head. His heavy black

beard had grown longer in the three years that had passed, and flowed down over his vest of purple and white halfway to his belt. His face was stern, and the deep lines of his strong features had grown more massive in outline. With the pride of every successive triumph had come also, something more of repose and conscious power. His step was slower, and his broad brown hand grasped the golden sceptre with less of nervous energy and more unrelenting force. But his brows were bent, and his expression, as he took his seat before the screen, over against the altar of the fire, was that of a man who was prepared to be discontented and cared little to conceal what he felt.

After him came the chief priest, completely robed in white, with a thick, white linen sash rolled for a girdle about his waist, the fringed ends hanging stiffly down upon one side. Upon his head he wore a great mitre, also of white linen, and a broad fringed stole of the same material fell in two wide bands from each side

of his neck to his feet. His beard was black and glossy, fine as silk, and reached almost to his waist. He came and stood with his back to the king and his face to the altar, ten paces from the second fire.

Then, from behind the screen and from each side of it, the other priests filed out, two and two, all clad in white like the chief priest, save that their mitres were smaller and they wore no stole. They came out and ranged themselves around the walls of the temple, threescore and nine men, of holy order, trained in the ancient chanting of the Mazdayashnian hymns; men in the prime and strength of life, black-bearded and broad-shouldered, whose massive brows and straight features indicated noble powers of mind and body.

The two who stood nearest to the chief priest came forward, and taking from his hands a square linen cloth he bore, bound it across his mouth and tied it behind his neck in a firm knot by means of strings. Then, one of them put into his left hand a fan of eagles' feathers, and the other gave

him a pair of wrought-iron pincers. Then they left him to advance alone to the altar.

He went forward till he was close to the bronze brazier, and stooping down, he took from the heap of fuel a clean white stick, with the pincers, which he carefully laid upon the fire. Then with his left hand he gently fanned the flames, and his mouth being protected by the linen cloth in such a manner that his breath could not defile the sacred fire, he began slowly and in a voice muffled by the bandage he wore, to recite the beginning of the sacrificial hymn :

"Best of all goods is purity.

Glory, glory to him

Who is best and purest in purity.

*For he who ruleth from purity, he abideth
according to the will of the Lord.*

*The All-Wise giveth gifts for the works which
man doeth in the world for the Lord.*

*He who protecteth the poor giveth the kingdom
to Ahura."*¹

¹ Probably the oldest hymns in the Avesta language.

Then all the priests repeated the verses together in chorus, their voices sounding in a unison which, though not precisely song, seemed tending to a musical cadence as the tones rose and fell again upon the last two syllables of each verse. And then again, the chief priest and the other priests together repeated the hymn, many times, in louder and louder chorus, with more and more force of intonation ; till the chief priest stepped back from the fire, and delivering up the pincers and the fan, allowed the two assistants to unbind the cloth from his mouth.

He walked slowly up the temple on the left side, and keeping his right hand toward the altar, he walked seven times around it, repeating a hymn alone in low tones ; till, after the seventh time, he went up to the farther end of the hall, and stood before the black marble trough in which the fermented Haoma stood ready, having been prepared with due ceremony three days before.

Then, in a loud voice, he intoned the chant in praise of Zaothra and Bareshma, holding high in

his right hand the bundle of sacred stalks ; which he, from time to time, moistened a little in the water from a vessel which stood ready, and sprinkled to the four corners of the temple. The priests again took up the strain in chorus, repeating over and over the burden of the song.

*“ Zaothra, I praise thee and desire thee with
praise !*

*Bareshma, I praise thee and desire thee with
praise !*

*Zaothra, with Bareshma united, I praise you
and desire you with praise !*

*Bareshma, with Zaothra united, I praise you
and desire you with praise !”*

Suddenly the chief priest laid down the Bareshma, and seizing one of the golden goblets, filled it, with the wooden ladle, from the dark receptacle of the juice. As he poured it high, the yellow light of the lamp caught the transparent greenish fluid, and made it sparkle strangely. He put the goblet to his lips and drank.

The king, sitting in silence upon his carved throne at the other extremity of the temple, bent his brows in a dark frown as he saw the hated ceremony begin. He knew how it ended, and grand as the words were which they would recite when the subtle fluid had fired their veins, he loathed to see the intoxication that got possession of them ; and the frenzy with which they howled the sacred strains seemed to him to destroy the solemnity and dignity of a hymn, in which all that was solemn and high would otherwise have seemed to be united.

The chief priest drank and then, filling both goblets, gave them to the priests at his right and left hand ; who, after drinking, passed each other, and made way for those next them ; and so the whole number filed past the Haoma vessel and drank their share till they all had changed places, and those who had stood upon the right, now stood upon the left ; and those who were first upon the left hand, were now upon the right. And when all had drunk, the chief priest intoned

the great hymn of praise, and all the chorus united with him in high, clear tones :

“ The All-Wise Creator, Ahura Mazda, the greatest, the best, the most fair in glory and majesty,

“ The mightiest in his strength, the wisest in his wisdom, the holiest in his holiness, whose power is of all power the fairest,

“ Who is very wise, who maketh all things to rejoice afar,

“ Who hath made us and formed us, who hath saved us, the holiest among the heavenly ones,

“ Him I adore and praise, unto him I declare the sacrifice, him I invite,

“ I declare the sacrifice to the Protector, the Peace-maker, who maketh the fire to burn, who preserveth the wealth of the earth ; the whole earth and the wisdom thereof, the seas and the waters, the land and all growing things, I invite to the sacrifice.

“ Cattle and living things, and the fire of Ahura, the sure helper, the lord of the archangels,

*" The nights and the days, I call upon, the purity
of all created light,*

*" The Lord of light, the sun in his glory, glorious
in name and worthy of honour,*

*" Who giveth food unto men, and multiplieth the
cattle upon the earth, who causeth mankind to in-
crease, I call upon and invite to the sacrifice,*

*" Water, and the centre of all waters, given and
made of God, that refresheth all things and maketh
all things to grow, I call upon and invite.*

*" The souls of the righteous and pure, the whole
multitude of living men and women upon earth, I
call upon and invite.*

*" I call upon the triumph and the mighty
strength of God,*

*" I call upon the archangels who keep the world,
upon the months, upon the pure, new moon, the
lordship of purity in heaven,*

*" I call upon the feasts of the years and the
seasons, upon the years and the months and days,*

" I call upon the star Ahura,¹ and upon the one

¹ Ahura, Jupiter. Tistrya, Sirius.

*great and eternal in purity, and upon all the stars,
the works of God,*

*“ Upon the star Tistrya I call, the far-shining,
the magnificent—upon the fair moon that shineth
upon the young cattle, upon the glorious sun swift
in the race of his flight, the eye of the Lord.*

*“ I call upon the spirits and souls of the righteous,
on the fire-begotten of the Lord, and upon all fires.*

*“ Mountains and all hills, lightened and full of
light.*

*“ Majesty of kingly honour, the Majesty of the
king which dieth not, is not diminished,*

*“ All wisdom and blessings and true promises,
all men who are full of strength and power and
might,*

*“ All places and lands and countries beneath the
heavens, and above the heavens, light without begin-
ning, existing, and without end,*

*“ All creatures pure and good, male and female
upon the earth.*

“ All you I invite and call upon to the sacrifice.

“ Havani, pure, lord of purity !

"Shavanghi, pure, lord of purity !

"Rapithwina, pure, lord of purity !

"Uzayêirina, pure, lord of purity !

*"Aiwishruthrema, Aibigaya, pure, lord of
purity !*

"Ushahina, pure, lord of purity !

*"To Havani, Shavanghi and Vishya, the pure,
the lords of purity most glorious, be honour and
prayer and fulfilment and praise.*

*"To the days, and the nights, and the hours, the
months and the years and the feasts of years, be
honour and prayer and fulfilment and praise be-
fore Auramazda, the All-Wise, for ever and ever
and ever." ¹*

As the white-robed priests shouted the verses of the long hymn, their eyes flashed and their bodies moved rhythmically from side to side with an ever-increasing motion. From time to time, the golden goblets were filled with the sweet Haoma juice, and passed rapidly from hand to

¹ Partly a translation, partly a close imitation in a condensed form of Yashna I.

hand along the line, and as each priest drank more freely of the subtle fermented liquor, his eyes gained a new and more unnatural light, and his gestures grew more wild, while the whole body of voices rose together from an even and dignified chant to an indistinguishable discord of deafening yells.

Ever more and more they drank, repeating the verses of the hymn without order or sequence. One man repeated a verse over and over again in ear-piercing shrieks, swaying his body to and fro till he dropped forward upon the ground, foaming at the mouth, his features distorted with a wild convulsion, and his limbs as rigid as stone. Here, a band of five locked their arms together, and, back to back, whirled madly round, screaming out the names of the archangels, in an indiscriminate rage of sound and broken syllables. One, less enduring than the rest, relaxed his hold upon his fellow's arm and fell headlong on the pavement, while the remaining four were carried on by the force of their whirling, and fell to-

gether against others who steadied themselves against the wall, swaying their heads and arms from side to side. Overthrown by the fall of their companions, these in their turn fell forward upon the others, and in a few moments, the whole company of priests lay grovelling one upon the other, foaming at the mouth, but still howling out detached verses of their hymn—a mass of raging, convulsed humanity, tearing each other in the frenzy of drunkenness, rolling over and over each other in the twisted contortions of frenzied maniacs. The air grew thick with the smoke of the fire and of the lamps, and the unceasing, indescribable din of the hoarsely howling voices seemed to make the very roof rock upon the pillars that held it up, as though the stones themselves must go mad and shriek in the universal fury of sound. The golden goblets rolled upon the marble pavement, and the sweet green juice ran in slimy streams upon the floor. The high priest himself, utterly intoxicated and screaming with a voice like a wild beast in agony,

fell backwards across the marble vase at the foot of the mortar and his hand and arm plashed into the dregs of the fermented Haoma.

Never had the drunken frenzy reached such a point before. The king had sat motionless and frowning upon his seat until he saw the high priest fall headlong into the receptacle of the sacred Haoma. Then, with a groan, he laid his two hands upon the arms of his carved chair, and rose to his feet in utter disgust and horror. But, as he turned to go, he stood still and shook from head to foot, for he saw beside him a figure that might, at such a moment, have startled the boldest.

A tall man of unearthly looks stood there, whose features he seemed to know, but could not recognise. His face was thin to emaciation, and his long, white hair fell in tangled masses, with his huge beard, upon his half-naked shoulders and bare chest. The torn, dark mantle he wore was falling to the ground as he faced the drunken herd of howling priests and lifted up his thin blanched arms and bony fingers, as though in

protest at the hideous sight. His deep-set eyes were blue and fiery, flashing with a strange light. He seemed not to see Darius, but he gazed in deepest horror upon the writhing mass of bestial humanity below.

Suddenly his arms shook, and standing there, against the dark marble screen, like the very figure and incarnation of fate, he spoke in a voice that, without effort, seemed to dominate the hideous din of yelling voices—a voice that was calm and clear as a crystal bell, but having that in it which carried instantly the words he spoke to the ears of the very most besotted wretch that lay among the heaps upon the floor—a voice that struck like a sharp steel blade upon iron.

“I am the prophet of the Lord. Hold ye your peace.”

As a wild beast's howling suddenly diminishes and grows less and dies away to silence, when the hunter's arrow has sped close to the heart with a mortal wound, so in one moment, the incoherent din sank down, and the dead stillness

that followed was dreadful by contrast. Darius stood with his hand upon the arm of his chair, not understanding the words of the fearful stranger; still less the mastering power those words had upon the drunken priests. But his courage did not desert him, and he feared not to speak.

"How sayest thou that thou art a prophet? Who art thou?" he asked.

"Thou knowest me and hast sent for me," answered the white-haired man, in his calm tones; but his fiery eyes rested on the king's, and Darius almost quailed under the glance. "I am Zoroaster; I am come to proclaim the truth to thee and to these miserable men, thy priests."

The fear they felt had restored the frenzied men to their senses. One by one, they rose and crept back towards the high priest himself, who had struggled to his feet, and stood upon the basement of the mortar above all the rest.

Then Darius looked, and he knew that it was Zoroaster, but he knew not the strange look upon

his face, and the light in his eyes was not as the light of other days. He turned to the priests.

"Ye are unworthy priests," he cried angrily, "for ye are drunk with your own sacrifice, and ye defile God's temple with unseemly cries. Behold this man—can ye tell me whether he be indeed a prophet?" Darius, whose anger was fast taking the place of the awe he had felt when he first saw Zoroaster beside him, strode a step forward, with his hand upon his sword-hilt, as though he would take summary vengeance upon the desecrators of the temple.

"He is surely a liar!" cried the high priest from his position beyond the altar, as though hurling defiance at Zoroaster through the flames.

"He is surely a liar!" repeated all the priests together, following their head.

"He is a Magian, a worshipper of idols, a liar and the father of lies! Down with him! Slay him before the altar; destroy the unbeliever that entereth the temple of Ahura Mazda!"

"Down with the Magian! Down with the

idolater!" cried the priests, and moved forward in a body toward the thin white-haired man who stood facing them, serene and high.

Darius drew his short sword and rushed before Zoroaster to strike down the foremost of the priests. But Zoroaster seized the keen blade in the air as though it had been a reed, and wrenched it from the king's strong grip, and broke it in pieces like glass, and cast the fragments at his feet. Darius staggered back in amazement, and the herd of angry men, in whose eyes still blazed the drunkenness of the Haoma, huddled together for a moment like frightened sheep.

"I have no need of swords," said Zoroaster, in his cold, clear voice.

Then the high priest cried aloud, and ran forward and seized a brand from the sacred fire.

"It is Angramainyus, the Power of Evil," he yelled fiercely. "He is come to fight with Auramazda in his temple! But the fire of the Lord shall destroy him!"

As the priest rushed upon him, with the blaz-

ing brand raised high to strike, Zoroaster faced him and fixed his eyes upon the angry man. The priest suddenly stood still, his hand in mid-air, and the stout piece of burning wood fell to the floor, and lay smouldering and smoking upon the pavement.

“Tempt not the All-Wise Lord, lest he destroy thee,” said Zoroaster solemnly. “Hearken, ye priests, and obey the word from heaven. Take the brazier from your altar, and scatter the embers upon the floor, for the fire is defiled.”

Silent and trembling, the priests obeyed, for they were afraid ; but the high priest stood looking in amazement upon Zoroaster.

When the brazier was gone, and the coals were scattered out upon the pavement, and the priests had trodden out the fire with their leathern shoes, Zoroaster went to the black marble altar, and faced the east, looking towards the stone mortar at the end. He laid his long, thin hands upon the flat surface and drew them slowly together ; and, in the sight of the priests, a light sprang up

softly between his fingers ; gradually at first, then higher and higher, till it stood like a blazing spear-head in the midst, emitting a calm, white effulgence that darkened the lamps overhead, and shed an unearthly whiteness on Zoroaster's white face.

He stepped back from the altar, and a low murmur of astonishment rose from all the crowd of white-robed men. Darius stood in silent wonder, gazing alternately upon the figure of Zoroaster, and upon the fragments of his good sword that lay scattered upon the pavement.

Zoroaster looked round upon the faces of the priests with blazing eyes :

"If ye be true priests of Ahura Mazda, raise with me the hymn of praise," he said. "Let it be heard in the heavens, and let it echo beyond the spheres!"

Then his voice rose calm and clear above all the others, and lifting up his eyes and hands, he intoned the solemn chant :

"He, who by truth ruleth in purity, abideth according to the will of the Lord.

"The Lord All-Wise is the giver of gifts to men for the works which men in the world shall do in the truth of the Lord.

"He who protecteth the poor giveth the kingdom to God.

"Best of all earthly goods is truth.

"Glory, glory on high for ever to him who is best in heaven, and truest in truth on earth!"

Zoroaster's grand voice rang out, and all the priests sang melodiously together; and upon the place which had been the scene of such frenzy and fury and drunkenness, there descended a peace as holy and calm as the quiet flame that burned without fuel upon the black stone in the midst. One by one, the priests came and fell at Zoroaster's feet; the chief priest first of all.

"Thou art the prophet and priest of the Lord," each said, one after another. "I acknowledge

thee to be the chief priest, and I swear to be a true priest with thee."

And last of all, the king, who had stood silently by, came and would have kneeled before Zoroaster. But Zoroaster took his hands, and they embraced.

"Forgive me the wrong I did thee, Zoroaster," said Darius. "For thou art a holy man, and I will honour thee as thou wast not honoured before."

"Thou hast done me no wrong," answered Zoroaster. "Thou hast sent for me, and I am come to be thy faithful friend, as I swore to thee, long ago, in the tent at Shushan."

Then they took Zoroaster's torn clothes, and they clad him in white robes and set a spotless mitre upon his head; and the king, for the second time, took his golden chain from his own neck, and put it about Zoroaster's shoulders. And they led him away into the palace.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN it was known that Zoroaster had returned, there was some stir in the palace. The news that he was made high priest soon reached Ne-hushta's ears, and she wondered what change had come over him in three years that could have made a priest of such a man. She remembered him young and marvellously fair, a warrior at all points, though at the same time an accomplished courtier. She could not imagine him invested with the robes of priesthood, leading a chorus of singers in the chanting of the hymns.

But it was not only as a chief priest that Darius had reinstalled Zoroaster in the palace. The king needed a counsellor and adviser, and the learned priest seemed a person fitted for the post.

On the following day, Nehushta, as was her wont, went out, in the cool of the evening, to walk in the gardens, attended by her maidens, her fan-girls and the slaves who bore her carpet and cushions in case she wished to sit down. She walked languidly, as though she hardly cared to lift her delicate slippered feet from the smooth walk, and often she paused and plucked a flower, and all her train of serving-women stopped behind her, not daring even to whisper among themselves, for the young queen was in no gentle humour of mind. Her face was pale and her eyes were heavy, for she knew the man she had so loved in other days was near, and though he had so bitterly deceived her, the sound of his sweet promises was yet in her ears; and sometimes, in her dreams, she felt the gentle breath of his mouth upon her sleeping lips, and woke with a start of joy that was but the forerunner of a new sadness.

Slowly she paced the walks of the rose-gardens, thinking of another place in the far north, where

there had been roses, and myrtles too, upon a terrace where the moonlight was very fair.

As she turned a sharp corner where the overhanging shrubbery darkened the declining light to a dusky shade, she found herself face to face with the man of whom she was thinking. His tall thin figure, clad in spotless white robes, seemed like a shadow in the gloom, and his snowy beard and hair made a strange halo about his young face, that was so thin and worn. He walked slowly, his hands folded together, and his eyes upon the ground; while a few paces behind him two young priests followed with measured steps, conversing in low tones, as though fearing to disturb the meditations of their master.

Nehushta started a little and would have passed on, although she recognised the face of him she had loved. But Zoroaster lifted his eyes, and looked on her with so strange an expression that she stopped short in the way. The deep, calm light in his eyes awed her, and

there was something in his majestic presence that seemed of another world.

"Hail, Nehushta!" said the high priest quietly.

But, at the sound of his voice, the spell was broken. The Hebrew woman lifted her head proudly, and her black eyes flashed again.

"Greet me not," she answered, "for the greeting of a liar is like the sting of the serpent that striketh unawares in the dark."

Zoroaster's face never changed, only his luminous eyes gazed on hers intently, and she paused again, as though riveted to the spot.

"I lie not, nor have lied to thee ever," he answered calmly. "Go thou hence, ask her whom thou hatest, whether I have deceived thee. Farewell."

He turned his gaze from her and passed slowly on, looking down to the ground, his hands folded before him. He left her standing in the way, greatly troubled and not understanding his saying.

Had she not seen with her eyes how he held Atossa in his arms on that evil morning in

Shushan ? Had she not seen how, when he was sent away, he had written a letter to Atossa and no word to herself ? Could these things which she had seen and known, be untrue ? The thought was horrible—that her whole life had perhaps been wrecked and ruined by a mistake. And yet there was not any mistake, she repeated to herself. She had seen ; one must believe what one sees. She had heard Atossa's passionate words of love, and had seen Zoroaster's arms go round her drooping body ; one must believe what one sees and hears and knows !

But there was a ringing truth in his voice just now when he said : " I lie not, nor have lied to thee ever." A lie—no, not spoken, but done ; and the lie of an action is greater than the lie of a word. And yet, his voice sounded true just now in the dusk, and there was something in it, something like the ring of a far regret. " Ask her whom thou hatest," he had said. That was Atossa. There was no other woman whom she hated—no man save him.

She had many times asked herself whether or no she loved the king. She felt something for him that she had not felt for Zoroaster. The passionate enthusiasm of the strong, dark warrior sometimes carried her away and raised her with it; she loved his manliness, his honesty, his unchanging constancy of purpose. And yet Zoroaster had had all these, and more also, though they had shown themselves in a different way. She looked back and remembered how calm he had always been, how utterly superior in his wisdom. He seemed scarcely mortal, until he had one day fallen—and fallen so desperately low in her view, that she loathed the memory of that feigned calmness and wisdom and purity. For it must have been feigned. How else could he have put his arms about Atossa, and taken her head upon his breast, while she sobbed out words of love?

But if he loved Atossa, she loved him as well. She said so, cried it aloud upon the terrace where any one might have heard it.

Why then had he left the court, and hidden himself so long in the wilderness? Why, before going out on his wanderings, had he disguised himself, and gone and stood where the procession passed, and hissed out a bitter insult as Nehushta went by? For her sake he had abandoned his brilliant life these three years, to dwell in the desert, to grow so thin and miserable of aspect that he looked like an old man. And his hair and beard were white—she had heard that a man might turn white from sorrow in a day. Was it grief that had so changed him? Grief to see her wedded to the king before his eyes? His voice rang so true: "Ask her whom thou hatest," he had said. In truth she would ask. It was all too inexplicable, and the sudden thought that she had perhaps wronged him three long years ago—even the possibility of the thought that seemed so little possible to her yesterday—wrought strangely in her breast, and terrified her. She would ask Atossa to her face whether Zoroaster had loved her. She would tell how she

had seen them together upon the balcony, and heard Atossa's quick, hot words. She would threaten to tell the king; and if the elder queen refused to answer truth, she would indeed tell him and put her rival to a bitter shame.

She walked more quickly upon the smooth path, and her hands wrung each other, and once she felt the haft of that wicked Indian knife she ever wore. When she turned back and went up the broad steps of the palace, the moon was rising above the far misty hills to eastward, and there were lights beneath the columned portico. She paused and looked back across the peaceful valley, and far down below, a solitary nightingale called out a few melancholy notes, and then burst forth into glorious song.

Nehushta turned again to go in, and there were tears in her dark eyes, that had not stood there for many a long day. But she clasped her hands together, and went forward between the crouching slaves, straight to Atossa's apartment. It was not usual for any one to gain access to

the elder queen's inner chambers without first obtaining permission from Atossa herself, and Nehushta had never been there. They met rarely in public, and spoke little, though each maintained the appearances of courtesy; but Atossa's smile was the sweeter of the two. In private they never saw each other; and the queen's slaves would perhaps have tried to prevent Nehushta from entering, but her black eyes flashed upon them in such dire wrath as she saw them before her, that they crouched away and let her pass on unmolested.

Atossa sat, as ever at that hour, in her toilet-chamber, surrounded by her tirewomen. The room was larger than the one at Shushan, for she had caused it to be built after her own plans; but her table was the same as ever, and upon it stood the broad silver mirror, which she never allowed to be left behind when she travelled.

Her magnificent beauty had neither changed nor faded in three years. Such strength as hers was not to be broken, nor worn out, by the mere

petty annoyances of palace life. She could sustain the constant little warfare she waged against the king, without even so much as looking careworn and pale for a moment, though the king himself often looked dark and weary, and his eyes were heavy with sleeplessness for the trouble she gave him. Yet he could never determine to rid himself of her, even when he began to understand the profound badness of her character. She exercised a certain fascination over him, as a man grows fond of some beautiful, wicked beast he has half-tamed, though it turn and show its teeth at him sometimes, and be altogether more of a care than a pastime. She was so fair and evil that he could not hurt her; it would have seemed a crime to destroy anything so wondrously made. Moreover, she could amuse him and make many an hour pass pleasantly when she was so disposed.

She was fully attired for the banquet that was to take place late in the evening, but her women were still about her, and she looked at

herself critically in the mirror, and would have changed the pinning of her tiara, so that her fair hair should fall forward upon one side, instead of backwards over her shoulder. She tried the effect of the change upon her face, and peered into the mirror beneath the bright light of the tall lamps ; when, on a sudden, as she looked, she met the reflection of two angry dark eyes, and she knew that Nehushta was behind her.

She rose to her feet, turning quickly, and the sweep of her long robe overthrew the light carved chair upon the marble floor. She faced Nehushta with a cold smile that betrayed surprise at being thus interrupted in her toilet rather than any dread of the interview. Her delicate eyebrows arched themselves in something of scorn, but her voice came low and sweet as ever.

"It is rarely indeed that the queen Nehushta deigns to visit her servant," she said. "Had she sent warning of her coming, she would have been more fittingly received."

Nehushta stood still before her. She hated

that cool, still voice that choked her like a tightening bowstring about her neck.

"We have small need of court formalities," answered the Hebrew woman, shortly. "I desire to speak with you alone upon a matter of importance."

"I am alone," returned Atossa, seating herself upon the carved chair, which one of the slaves had instantly set up again, and motioning to Nehushta to be seated. But Nehushta glanced at the serving-women and remained standing.

"You are not alone," she said briefly.

"They are not women—they are slaves," answered Atossa, with a smile.

"Will you not send them away?"

"Why should I?"

"You need not—I will," returned Nehushta. "Begone, and quickly!" she added, turning to the little group of women and slave-girls who stood together, looking on in wonder. At Nehushta's imperious command, they hurried through the door, and the curtains fell behind them.

They knew Nehushta's power in the palace too well to hesitate to obey her, even in the presence of their own mistress.

"Strange ways you have!" exclaimed Atossa, in a low voice. She was fiercely angry, but there was no change in her face. She dangled a little chain upon her finger, and tapped the ground with her foot as she sat. That was all.

"I am not come here to wrangle with you about your slaves. They will obey me without wrangling. I met Zoroaster in the gardens an hour since."

"By a previous arrangement, of course?" suggested Atossa, with a sneer. But her clear blue eyes fixed themselves upon Nehushta with a strange and deadly look.

"Hold your peace and listen to me," said Nehushta in a fierce, low voice, and her slender hand stole to the haft of the knife by her side.

Atossa was a brave woman, false though she was; but she saw that the Hebrew princess had her in her power—she saw the knife and she saw

the gleam in those black eyes. They were riveted on her face, and she grew grave and remained silent.

"Tell me the truth," pursued Nehushta hurriedly. "Did Zoroaster love you three years ago—when I saw you in his arms upon the terrace the morning when he came back from Ecbatana?"

But she little knew the woman with whom she had to deal. Atossa had found time in that brief moment to calculate her chances of safety. A weaker woman would have lied; but the fair queen saw that the moment had come wherein she could reap a rich harvest of vengeance upon her rival, and she trusted to her coolness and strength to deliver her if Nehushta actually drew the knife she wore.

"I loved him," she said slowly. "I love him yet, and I hate you more than I love him. Do you understand?"

"Speak—go on!" cried Nehushta, half breathless with anger.

"I loved him, and I hated you. I hate you

still," repeated the queen slowly and gravely. "The letter I had from him was written to you—but it was brought to me. Nay—be not so angry, it was very long ago. Of course you can murder me, if you please—you have me in your power, and you are but a cowardly Jew, like twenty of my slave-women. I fear you not. Perhaps you would like to hear the end?"

Nehushta had come nearer and stood looking down at the beautiful woman, her arms folded before her. Atossa never stirred as Nehushta approached, but kept her eye steadily fixed on hers. Nehushta's arms were folded, and the knife hung below her girdle in its loose sheath.

Atossa's white arm went suddenly out and laid hold of the haft, and the keen blue steel flashed out of its scabbard with a sheen like dark lightning on a summer's evening.

Nehushta started back as she saw the sharp weapon in her enemy's hand. But Atossa laughed a low sweet laugh of triumph.

"You shall hear the end now," she said, hold-

ing the knife firmly in her hand. "You shall not escape hearing the end now, and you shall not murder me with your Indian poisoner here." She laughed again as she glanced at the ugly curve of the dagger. "I was talking with Zoroaster," she continued, "when I saw you upon the stairs, and then—oh, it was so sweet! I cried out that he should never leave me again, and I threw my arms about his neck—his lordly neck that you so loved!—and I fell, so that he had to hold me up. And you saw him— Oh, it was sweet! It was the sweetest moment of my life when I heard you groan and hurry away and leave us! It was to hurt you that I did it—that I humbled my queenliness before him; but I loved him, though—and he, he your lover, whom you despised then and cast away for this black-faced king of ours—he thrust me from him, and pushed me off, and drove me weeping to my chamber; and he said he loved me not, nor wished my love. Ay, that was bitter, for I was ashamed—I who never was shamed of man or woman.

But there was more sweetness in your torment than bitterness in my shame. He never knew you were there. He screamed out to you from the crowd in the procession his parting curse on your unfaithfulness and went out—but he nearly killed those two strong spearmen who tried to seize him. How strong he was then, how brave! What a noble lover for any woman! So tall and delicate and fair with all his strength! He never knew why you left him—he thought it was to wear the king's purple, to thrust a bit of gold in your hair! He must have suffered—you have suffered too—such delicious torture, I have often soothed myself to sleep with the thought of it. It is very sweet for me to see you lying there with my wound in your heart. It will rankle long; you cannot get it out—you are married to the king now, and Zoroaster has turned priest for love of you. I think even the king would hardly love you if he could see you now—you look so pale. I will send for the Chaldean physician—you might die. I should be sorry if you died,

you could not suffer any more then. I could not give up the pleasure of hurting you—you have no idea how delicious it is. Oh, how I hate you !”

Atossa rose suddenly to her feet, with flashing eyes. Nehushta, in sheer horror of such hideous cruelty, had fallen back against the door-post, and stood grasping the curtain with one hand while the other was pressed to her heart, as though to control the desperate agony she suffered. Her face was paler than the dead, and her long, black hair fell forward over her ghastly cheeks.

“ Shall I tell you more ?” Atossa began again. “ Should you like to hear more of the truth ? I could tell you how the king——”

But as she spoke, Nehushta threw up her hands and pressed them to her throbbing temples ; and with a low wail, she turned and fled through the doorway between the thick curtains, that parted with her weight and fell together again when she had passed.

“ She will tell the king,” said Atossa aloud,

when she was gone. "I care not—but I will keep the knife," she added, laying the keen blade upon the table, amid the little instruments of her toilet.

But Nehushta ran fast through the corridors and halls till she came to her slaves who had waited for her at the entrance to the queen's apartment. Then she seemed to recollect herself, and slackened her pace, and went on to her own chambers. But her women saw her pale face, and whispered together as they cautiously followed her.

She was wretched beyond all words. In a moment, her doubts and her fears had all been realised, and the stain of unfaithfulness had been washed from the memory of her lover. But it was too late to repent her hastiness. She had been married to Darius now for nearly three years, and Zoroaster was a man so changed that she would hardly have recognised him that evening, had she not known that he was in the palace. He looked more like the aged Daniel whom he

had buried at Ecbatana than like the lordly warrior of three years ago. She wondered, as she thought of the sound of his voice in the garden, how she could ever have doubted him, and the remembrance of his clear eyes was both bitter and sweet to her.

She lay upon her silken pillows and wept hot tears for him she had loved long ago, for him and for herself—most of all for the pain she had made him suffer, for that bitter agony that had turned his young, fair locks to snowy white; she wept the tears for him that she could fancy he must have shed in those long years for her. She buried her face and sobbed aloud, so that even the black fan-girl who stood waving the long palm-leaf over her in the dim light of the bedchamber—even the poor black creature from the farther desert, whom her mistress did not half believe human, felt pity for the royal sorrow she saw, and took one hand from the fan to brush the tears from her small red eyes.

Nehushta's heart was broken, and from that

day none saw her smile. In one hour the whole misery of all possible miseries came upon her, and bowed her to the ground, and crushed out the life and the light of her nature. As she lay there, she longed to die, as she had never longed for anything while she lived, and she would have had small hesitation in killing the heart that beat with such agonising pain in her breast—saving that one thought prevented her. She cared not for revenge any more. What was the life of that cold, cruel thing, the queen, worth, that by taking it, she could gain comfort? But she felt and knew that, before she died, she must see Zoroaster once more, and tell him that she knew all the truth—that she knew he had not deceived her, and that she implored his forgiveness for the wrong she had done him. He would let her rest her head upon his breast and weep out her heartful of piteous sorrow once before she died. And then—the quiet stream of the Araxes flowed softly, cold and clear, among the rose-gardens below the palace. The kindly water would take

her to its bosom, beneath the summer's moon, and the nightingales she loved would sing her a gentle good-night—good-night for ever, while the cool wave flowed over her weary breast and aching head.

CHAPTER VII.

ON the next day, in the cool of the evening, Nehushta walked again in the garden. But Zoroaster was not there. And for several days Nehushta came at that hour, and at other hours in the day, but found him not. She saw him indeed from time to time in public, but she had no opportunity of speaking with him as she desired. At last, she determined to send for him, and to see whether he would come, or not.

She went out, attended only by two slaves; the one bearing a fan and the other a small carpet and a cushion—black women from the southern parts of Syria, towards Egypt, who would not understand the high Persian she would be likely to speak with Zoroaster, though her own Hebrew tongue was intelligible to them. When

she reached a quiet spot, where one of the walks ended suddenly in a little circle among the rose-trees, far down from the palace, she had her carpet spread, and her cushion was placed upon it, and she wearily sat down. The fan-girl began to ply her palm-leaf, as much to cool the heated summer air as to drive away the swarms of tiny gnats which abounded in the garden. Nehushta rested upon one elbow, her feet drawn together upon the carpet of dark soft colours, and waited a few minutes as though in thought. At last she seemed to have decided, and turned to the slave who had brought her cushion, as she stood at a little distance, motionless, her hands folded and hidden under the thickness of the broad sash that girded her tunic at the waist.

“Go thou,” said the queen, “and seek out the high priest Zoroaster, and bring him hither quickly.”

The black woman turned and ran like a deer down the narrow path, disappearing in a moment amongst the shrubbery.

The breeze of the swinging fan blew softly on Nehushta's pale face and stirred the locks of heavy hair that fell from her tiara about her shoulders. Her eyes were half closed as she leaned back, and her lips were parted in a weary look of weakness that was new to her. Nearly an hour passed and the sun sank low, but Nehushta hardly stirred from her position.

It seemed very long before she heard steps upon the walk—the quick soft step of the slave-woman running before, barefooted and fleet, and presently the heavier tread of a man's leather shoe. The slave stopped at the entrance to the little circle of rose-trees, and a moment later, Zoroaster strode forward, and stood still and made a deep obeisance, a few steps from Nehushta.

"Forgive me that I sent for thee, Zoroaster," said the queen in quiet tones. But, as she spoke, a slight blush overspread her face, and relieved her deadly pallor. "Forgive me—I have somewhat to say which thou must hear."

Zoroaster remained standing before her as she

spoke, and his luminous eyes rested upon her quietly.

"I wronged thee three years ago, Zoroaster," said the queen in a low voice, but looking up at him. "I pray thee, forgive me—I knew not what I did."

"I forgave thee long ago," answered the high priest.

"I did thee a bitter wrong—but the wrong I did myself was even greater. I never knew till I went and asked—her!" At the thought of Atossa, the Hebrew woman's eyes flashed fire, and her small fingers clenched upon her palm. But, in an instant, her sad, weary look returned.

"That is all—if you forgive me," she said, and turned her head away. It seemed to her that there was nothing more to be said. He did not love her—he was far beyond love.

"Now, by Ahura Mazda, I have indeed forgiven thee. The blessing of the All-Wise be upon thee!" Zoroaster bent again, as though to take his leave, and he would have gone from her.

But when she heard his first footsteps, Nehushta raised herself a little and turned quickly towards him. It seemed as though the only light she knew were departing from her day.

"You loved me once," she said, and stopped, with an appealing look on her pale face. It was very weak of her; but oh! she was far spent with sorrow and grief. Zoroaster paused, and looked back upon her, very calmly, very gently.

"Ay—I loved you once—but not now. There is no more love in the earth for me. But I bless you for the love you gave me."

"I loved you so well," said Nehushta. "I love you still," she added, suddenly raising herself and gazing on him with a wild look in her eyes. "Oh, I love you still!" she cried passionately. "I thought I had put you away—forgotten you—trodden out your memory that I so hated I could not bear to hear your name! Ah! why did I do it, miserable woman that I am! I love you now—I love you—I love you with my whole heart—and it is too late!" She fell back upon

her cushion, and covered her face with her hands, and her breast heaved with passionate, tearless sobbing.

Zoroaster stood still, and a deep melancholy came over his beautiful, ethereal face. No regret stirred his breast, no touch of the love that had been waked his heart that slept for ever in the peace of the higher life. He would not have changed from himself to the young lover of three years ago, if he had been able. But he stood calm and sorrowful, as an angel from heaven gazing on the grief of the world—his thoughts full of sympathy for the pains of men, his soul still breathing the painless peace of the outer firmament whence he had come and whither he would return.

“Nehushta,” he said at last, seeing that her sobbing did not cease, “it is not meet that you should thus weep for anything that is past. Be comforted; the years of life are few, and you are one of the great ones of the earth. It is needful that all should suffer. Forget not that although

your heart be heavy, you are a queen, and must bear yourself as a queen. Take your life strongly in your hands and live it. The end is not far and your peace is at hand."

Nehushta looked up suddenly and grew very grave as he spoke. Her heavy eyes rested on his, and she sighed—but the sigh was still broken by the trembling of her past sobs.

"You, who are a priest and a prophet," she said,—“you, who read the heaven as it were a book—tell me, Zoroaster, is it not far? Shall we meet beyond the stars, as you used to tell me—so long ago?”

"It is not far," he answered, and a gentle smile illuminated his pale face. "Take courage—for truly it is not far."

He gazed into her eyes for a moment, and it seemed as though some of that steadfast light penetrated into her soul, for as he turned and went his way among the roses, a look of peace descended on her tired face, and she fell back upon her cushion and closed her eyes, and let

the breeze of the palm-fan play over her wan cheeks and through her heavy hair.

But Zoroaster returned into the palace, and he was very thoughtful. He had many duties to perform, besides the daily evening sacrifice in the temple, for Darius consulted him constantly upon many matters connected with the state; and on every occasion Zoroaster's keen foresight and knowledge of men found constant exercise in the development of the laws and statutes Darius was forming for his consolidated kingdom. First of all, the question of religion seemed to him of paramount importance; and here Zoroaster displayed all his great powers of organisation, as well as the true and just ideas he held upon the subject. Himself an ascetic mystic, he foresaw the danger to others of attempting to pursue the same course, or even of founding a system of mystical study. The object of mankind must be the welfare of mankind, and a set of priests who should shut themselves off from their fellow-men to pursue esoteric studies and to acquire know-

ledge beyond the reach of common humanity, must necessarily forget humanity itself in their effort to escape from it. The only possible scheme upon which a religion for the world could be based—especially for such a world as the empire of Darius—must be one where the broad principle of common good living stood foremost, and where the good of all humanity should be the good of each man's soul.

The vast influence of Zoroaster's name grew day by day, as from the palace of Stakhar he sent forth priests to the various provinces, full of his own ideas, bearing with them a simple form of worship and a rigid rule of life, which the iron laws of Darius began at once to enforce to the letter. The vast body of existing hymns, of which many were by no means distinctly Mazda-yashnian, were reduced to a limited number containing the best and purest; and the multifarious mass of conflicting caste practices, partly imported from India, and partly inherited by the pure Persians from the Aryan home in Sogdiana, was

simplified and reduced to a plain rule. The endless rules of purification were cut down to simple measures of health; the varying practices in regard to the disposal of the dead were all done away with by a great royal edict commanding the building of Dakhmas, or towers of death, all over the kingdom; within which the dead were laid by persons appointed for the purpose, and which were cleansed by them, at stated intervals. Severe measures were taken to prevent the destruction of cattle, for there were evident signs of the decrease of the beasts of the field in consequence of the many internal wars that had waged of late; and special laws were provided for the safety of dogs, which were regarded, for all reasons, as the most valuable companions of men in those times, as a means of protection to the flocks in the wilderness, and as the scavengers and cleansers of the great cities. Human life was protected by the most rigorous laws, and the utmost attention was given to providing for the treatment of women of all classes.

It would have been impossible to conceive a system better fitted to develop the resources of a semi-pastoral country, to preserve peace and to provide for the increasing wants and the public health of a multiplying people.

As for the religious rites, they assumed a form and a character which made them seem like simplicity itself by the side of the former systems ; and which, although somewhat complicated by the additions and alterations of a later and more superstitious generation, have still maintained the noble and honourable characteristics imparted to them by the great reformer and compiler of the Mazdayashnian religion.

The days flew quickly by, and Zoroaster's power grew apace. It was as though the whole court and kingdom had been but waiting for him to come and be the representative of wisdom and justice beside the conquering king, who had in so short a time reduced so many revolutions and fought so many fields in the consolidation of his empire. Zoroaster laid hold of all the existing

difficulties with a master-hand. His years of retirement seemed to have given him the accumulated force of many men, and the effect of his wise measures was quickly felt in every quarter of the provinces; while his words went forth like fire in the mouths of the priests he sent from Stakhar. He had that strange and rare gift, whereby a man inspires in his followers the profoundest confidence and the greatest energy to the performance of his will. He would have overthrown a world had he found himself resisted and oppressed, but every one of his statutes and utterances was backed by the royal arms and enforced by decrees against which there was no appeal. In a few months his name was spoken wherever the Persian rule was felt, and spoken everywhere with a high reverence; in which there was no fear mixed, such as people felt when they mentioned the Great King, and added quickly: "May he live for ever!"

In a few months the reform was complete, and the half-clad ascetic had risen by his own

wisdom and by the power of circumstances into the chiefest position in all Persia. Loaded with dignities, treated as the next to the Great King in all things, wearing the royal chain of office over his white priest's robes, and sitting at the right hand of Darius at the feast, Zoroaster nevertheless excited no envy among the courtiers, nor encroached in any way upon their privileges. The few men whom Darius trusted were indeed rarely at Stakhar,—the princes who had conspired against Smerdis, and Hydarnes and a few of the chief officers of the army,—they were mostly in the various provinces, in command of troops and fortresses, actively employed in enforcing the measures the king was framing with Zoroaster, and which were to work such great changes in the destinies of the empire. But when any of the princes or generals were summoned to the court by the king and learned to know what manner of man this Zoroaster was, they began to love him and to honour him also, as all those did who were near him. And they went away

saying that never king had so wise and just a counsellor as he was, nor one so worthy of trust in the smallest as in the greatest things.

But the two queens watched him, and watched his growing power, with different feelings. Ne-hushta scarcely ever spoke to him, but gazed at him from her sad eyes when none saw her; pondering over his prophecy that foretold the end so near at hand. She had a pride in seeing her old lover the strongest in the whole land, holding the destinies of the kingdom as in a balance; and it was a secret consolation to her to know that he had been faithful to her after all, and that it was for her sake that he had withdrawn into the desert and given himself to those meditations from which he had only issued to enjoy the highest power. And as she looked at him, she saw how he was much changed, and it hardly seemed as though in his body he were the same man she had so loved. Only when he spoke, and she heard the even, musical tones of his commanding voice, she sometimes felt the blood

rise to her cheeks with the longing to hear once more some word of tender love, such as he had been used to speak to her. But though he often looked at her and greeted her ever kindly, his quiet, luminous eyes changed not when they gazed on her, nor was there any warmer touch of colour in the waxen whiteness of his face. His youth was utterly gone, as the golden light had faded from his hair. He was not like an old man—he was hardly like a man at all; but rather like some beautiful, strange angel from another world, who moved among men and spoke with them, but was not of them. She seemed to look upon a memory, to love the shadow cast on earth by a being that was gone. But she loved the memory and the shadow well, and month by month, as she gazed, she grew more wan and weary.

It would not have been like Darius to take any notice of a trouble that did not present itself palpably before him and demand his attention. Nehushta scarcely ever spoke of Zoroaster, and

when the king mentioned him to her, it was always in connection with affairs of state. She seemed cold and indifferent, and the hot-blooded soldier monarch no longer looked on Zoroaster as a possible rival. He had white hair—he was, therefore an old man, out of all questions of love. But Darius was glad that the Hebrew queen never referred to former times, nor ever seemed to regret her old lover. Had he known of that night meeting in Atossa's toilet chamber, and of what Atossa had said then, his fury would probably have had no bounds. But he never knew. Nehushta was too utterly broken-hearted by the blow she had received to desire vengeance, and though she quietly scorned all intercourse with the woman who had injured her, she cared not to tell the king of the injury. It was too late. Had she known of the cruel deception that had been practised on her, one hour before she had married Darius, Atossa would have been in her grave these three years, and Nehushta would not have been queen. But the king knew none of

these things, and rejoiced daily in the wisdom of his chief counsellor and in the favour Auramazda had shown in sending him such a man in his need.

Meanwhile, Atossa's hatred grew apace. She saw with anger that her power of tormenting Nehushta was gone from her, that the spirit she had loved to torture was broken beyond all sensibility, and that the man who had scorned her love was grown greater than she. Against his wisdom and the king's activity, she could do little, and her strength seemed to spend itself in vain. Darius laughed mercilessly at her cunning objections to Zoroaster's reforms ; and Zoroaster himself eyed her coldly, and passed her by in silence when they met.

She bethought herself of some scheme whereby to destroy Zoroaster's power by a sudden and violent shock ; and for a time, she affected a more than usual serenity of manner, and her smile was sweeter than ever. If it were possible, she thought, to attract the king's attention and

forces to some distant point, it would not be a difficult matter to produce a sudden rising or disturbance in Stakhar, situated as the place was upon the very extreme border of the kingdom, within a few hours' march across the hills from the uncivilised desert country, which was infested at that time with hostile and turbulent tribes. She had a certain number of faithful retainers at her command still, whom she could employ as emissaries in both directions, and in spite of the scene that had taken place at Shushan when Phraortes was brought to her by the king, she knew she could still command his services for a revolution. He was a Magian at heart, and hated the existing monarchy. He was rich and powerful, and unboundedly vain—he could easily be prevailed upon to accept the principality of Media as a reward for helping to destroy the Persian kingdom; and indeed the matter had been discussed between him and the queen long ago.

Atossa revolved her scheme in her mind most

carefully for two whole months, and at last she resolved to act. Eluding all vigilance of the king, and laughing to herself at the folly of Darius and Zoroaster in allowing her such liberty, she succeeded without much trouble in despatching a letter to Phraortes, inquiring whether her affairs were now in such a prosperous condition as to admit of their being extended.

On the other hand, she sent a black slave she owned, with gifts, into the country of the barbarian tribes beyond the hills, to discover whether they could be easily tempted. This man she bribed with the promise of freedom and rich possessions, to undertake the dangerous mission. She knew him to be faithful, and able to perform the part he was to play.

In less than two months Phraortes sent a reply, wherein he stated that the queen's affairs were so prosperous that they might with safety be extended as she desired, and that he was ready to undertake any improvements provided she sent him the necessary directions and instructions.

The slave returned from the land of the dwellers in tents, with the information that they were numerous as the sands of the sea, riding like the whirlwinds across the desert, keen as a race of eagles for prey, devouring as locusts spreading over a field of corn, and greedy as jackals upon the track of a wounded antelope. Nothing but the terror of the Great King's name restrained them within their boundaries which they would leave at a moment's notice, as allies of any one who would pay them. They dwelt mostly beyond the desert to eastward in the low hill country; and they shaved their beards and slept with their horses in their tents. They were more horrible to look upon than the devils of the mountains, and fiercer than wolves upon the mountain paths.

Allowing for the imagery of her slave's account, Atossa comprehended that the people described could be easily excited to make a hostile descent upon the southern part of the kingdom, and notably upon the unprotected region

about Stakhar, where the fortress could afford shelter to a handful of troops and fugitives, but could in no wise defend the whole of the fertile district from a hostile incursion.

Atossa spent much time in calculating the distance from the palace to the fortress, and she came to the conclusion that a body of persons moving with some encumbrance might easily reach the stronghold in half a day. Her plan was a simple one, and easy of execution; though there was no limit to the evil results its success might have upon the kingdom.

She intended that a revolution should break out in Media, not under the leadership of Phraortes, lest she herself should perish, having been already suspected of complicity with him. But a man could be found—some tool of her powerful agent, who could be readily induced to set himself up as a pretender to the principality of the province, and he could easily be crushed at a later period by Phraortes, who would naturally furnish the money and supplies for the insurrection.

As soon as the news reached Stakhar, Darius would, in all probability, set out for Media in haste to arrive at the scene of the disturbance. He would probably leave Zoroaster behind to manage the affairs of state, which had centred in Stakhar during the last year and more. If, however, he took him with him, and left the court to follow on as far as Shushan, Atossa could easily cause an incursion of the barbarous tribes from the desert. The people of the south would find themselves abandoned by the king, and would rise against him, and Atossa could easily seize the power. If Zoroaster remained behind, the best plan would be to let the barbarians take their own course and destroy him. Separated from any armed force of magnitude sufficient to cope with a sudden invasion, he would surely fall in the struggle, or take refuge in an ignominious flight. With the boldness of her nature, Atossa trusted to circumstances to provide her with an easy escape for herself; and in the last instance, she trusted, as she had ever done, to

her marvellous beauty to save her from harm. To her beauty alone she owed her escape from many a fit of murderous anger in the time of Cambyses, and to her beauty she owed her salvation when Darius found her at Shushan, the wife and accomplice of the impostor Smerdis. She might again save herself by that means, if by no other, should she, by any mischance, fall into the hands of the barbarians. But she was determined to overthrow Zoroaster, even if she had to destroy her husband's kingdom in the effort. It was a bold and simple plan, and she doubted not of being successful.

During the months while she was planning these things, she was very calm and placid; her eyes met Zoroaster's with a frank and friendly glance that would have disarmed one less completely convinced of her badness; and her smile never failed the king when he looked for it. She bore his jests with unfailing equanimity and gentleness, for she felt that she should not have to bear them long. Even to Nehushta she gave

an occasional glance as though of hurt sympathy—a look that seemed to say to the world that she regretted the Hebrew queen's sullen temper and moody ways, so different from her own, but regarded them all the while as the outward manifestation of some sickness, for which she was to be pitied rather than blamed.

But, as the time sped, her heart grew more and more glad, for the end was at hand, and there was a smell of death in the air of the sweet rose-valley.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONCE more the spring months had come, and the fields grew green and the trees put forth their leaves. Four years had passed since Daniel had died in Ecbatana, leaving his legacy of wisdom to Zoroaster; and almost a year had gone by since Zoroaster had returned to the court at Stakhar. The time had sped very swiftly, except for Nehushta, whose life was heavy with a great weariness and her eyes hollow with suffering sleeplessness. She was not always the same, saving that she was always unhappy. There were days when she was resigned to her lot and merely hoped that it would soon be over; and she wondered how it was that she did not slip out of the gardens at evening, and go and sink her care and her great sorrow in the cool waves

of the Araxes, far down below. But then the thought came over her that she must see his face once more ; and it was always once more, so that the last time never came. And again, there were days when she hoped all things, madly, indiscriminately, without sequence—the king might die, Zoroaster might again love her, all might be well. But the mood of a hope that is senseless is very fleet, and despair follows close in its footsteps. Nehushta grew each time more sad, as she grew more certain that for her there was no hope.

At least it seemed as though Atossa had given up loving Zoroaster and thought no more of him than of another. Indeed Atossa seemed more anxious to please the king than formerly, in proportion as Darius seemed less easily pleased by her. But over all, Zoroaster's supremacy was felt in the palace, and though he was never known to be angry with any one, he was more feared than the fierce king himself, for his calm clear eyes were hard to meet and the words that fell from his lips had in them the ring of fate.

Moreover, he was known and his power was dreaded from one end of the kingdom to the other, and his name was like the king's signet, which sealed all things, and there was no appeal.

Upon a fair morning in the spring-time, when the sun was shining outside upon the roses still wet with dew, the king sat in an inner hall, half lying upon a broad couch², on which the warm rays of the sun fell through an upper window. He was watching with absorbed attention the tricks of an Indian juggler who had lately arrived at the court, and whom he had summoned that morning to amuse a leisure hour, for when the king was not actively engaged in business, or fighting, he loved some amusement, being of a restless temper and mind that needed constant occupation.

Atossa sat near him, upon a carved chair, turning over and over in her fingers a string of pearls as she gazed at the performances of the juggler. Two spearmen, clad in blue and scarlet and gold, stood motionless by the door, and Darius

and Atossa watched the sleight-handed Indian alone.

The man tossed a knife into the air and caught it, then two, then three, increasing the number in rapid succession till a score of bright blades made a shining circle in the air as he quickly tossed them up and passed them from hand to hand and tossed them again. Darius laughed at the man's skill, and looked up at the queen.

"You remind me of that fellow," said Darius.

"The king is very gracious to his handmaiden," answered Atossa, smiling, "I think I am less skilful, but more fair."

"You are fairer, it is true," returned the king; "but as for your skill, I know not. You seem always to be playing with knives, but you never wound yourself any more than he does."

The queen looked keenly at Darius, but her lips smiled gently. The thought crossed her mind that the king perhaps knew something of what had passed between her and Nehushta

nearly a year before, with regard to a certain Indian dagger. The knives the juggler tossed in the air reminded her of it by their shape. But the king laughed gaily and she answered without hesitation :

“I would it were true, for then I could be not only the king’s wife, but the king’s juggler !”

“I meant not so,” laughed Darius. “The two would hardly suit one another.”

“And yet, I need more skill than this Indian fellow, to be the king’s wife,” answered the queen slowly.

“Said I not so ?”

“Nay—but you meant not so,” replied Atossa, looking down.

“What I say, I mean,” he returned. “You need all the fairness of your face to conceal the evil in your heart, as this man needs all his skill in handling those sharp knives, that would cut off his fingers if, unawares, he touched the wrong edge of them.”

“I conceal nothing,” said the queen, with a

light laugh. "The king has a thousand eyes—how should I conceal anything from him?"

"That is a question which I constantly ask myself," answered Darius. "And yet, I often think I know your thoughts less well than those of the black girl who fans you when you are hot, and whose attention is honestly concentrated upon keeping the flies from your face—or of yonder stolid spearmen at the door, who watch us, and honestly wish they were kings and queens, to lie all day upon a silken couch, and watch the tricks of a paid conjurer."

As Darius spoke, the guards he glanced at turned suddenly and faced each other, standing on each side of the doorway, and brought their heavy spears to the ground with a ringing noise. In a moment the tall, thin figure of Zoroaster, in his white robes, appeared between them. He stopped respectfully at the threshold, waiting for the king to notice him, for, in spite of his power and high rank, he chose to maintain rigidly the formalities of the court.

Darius made a sign and the juggler caught his whirling knives, one after the other, and thrust them into his bag, and withdrew.

"Hail, Zoroaster!" said the king. "Come near and sit beside me, and tell me your business."

Zoroaster came forward and made a salutation, but he remained standing, as though the matter on which he came were urgent.

"Hail, king, and live for ever!" he said. "I am a bearer of evil news. A rider has come speeding from Ecbatana, escaped from the confusion. Media has revolted, and the king's guards are besieged within the fortress of Ecbatana."

Darius sat upright upon the edge of his couch; the knotted veins upon his temples swelled with sudden anger and his brow flushed darkly.

"Doubtless it is Phraortes who has set himself up as king," he said. Then, suddenly and fiercely, he turned upon Atossa. "Now is your hour come," he cried in uncontrollable anger. "You shall surely die this day, for you have done this,

and the powers of evil shall have your soul, which is of them, and of none other."

Atossa, for the first time in her whole life, turned pale to the lips and trembled, for she already seemed to taste death in the air. But even then, her boldness did not desert her, and she rose to her feet with a stateliness and a calmness that almost awed the king's anger to silence.

"Slay me if thou wilt," she said in a low voice, but firmly. "I am innocent of this deed." The great lie fell from her lips with a calmness that a martyr might have envied. But Zoroaster stepped between her and the king. As he passed her, his clear, calm eyes met hers for a moment. He read in her face the fear of death, and he pitied her.

"Let the king hear me," he said. "It is not Phraortes who has headed the revolt, and it is told me that Phraortes has fled from Ecbatana. Let the king send forth his armies and subdue the rebels, and let this woman go; for the fear of death is upon her and it may be that she has

not sinned in this matter. And if she have indeed sinned, will the king make war upon women, or redden his hands with the blood of his own wife?"

"You speak as a priest—I feel as a man," returned the king, savagely. "This woman has deserved death many times—let her die. So shall we be free of her."

"It is not lawful to do this thing," returned Zoroaster coldly, and his glance rested upon the angry face of Darius, as he spoke, and seemed to subdue his furious wrath. "The king cannot know whether she have deserved death or not, until he have the rebels of Ecbatana before him. Moreover, the blood of a woman is a perpetual shame to the man who has shed it."

The king seemed to waver, and Atossa, who watched him keenly, understood that the moment had come in which she might herself make an appeal to him. In the suddenness of the situation she had time to ask herself why Zoroaster, whom she had so bitterly injured, should intercede

for her. She could not understand his nobility of soul, and she feared some trap, into which she should fall by and by. But, meanwhile, she chose to appeal to the king's mercy herself, lest she should feel that she owed her preservation wholly to Zoroaster. It was a bold thought, worthy of a woman of her strength, in a moment of supreme danger.

With a quick movement she tore the tiara from her head and let it fall upon the floor. The mass of her silken hair fell all about her like a vesture of gold, and she threw herself at the king's feet, embracing his knees with a passionate gesture of appeal. Her face was very pale, and the beauty of it seemed to grow by the unnatural lack of colour, while her soft blue eyes looked up into the king's face with such an expression of imploring supplication that he was fain to acknowledge to himself that she moved his heart, for she had never looked so fair before. She spoke no word, but held his knees, and as she gazed, two beautiful great tears rolled slowly from under her eyelids,

and trembled upon her pale, soft cheeks, and her warm, quick breath went up to his face.

Darius tried to push her from him, but she would not go, and he was forced to look at her, and his anger melted, and he smiled somewhat grimly, though his brows were bent.

"Go to," he said, "I jested. It is impossible for a man to slay anything so beautiful as you."

Atossa's colour returned to her cheeks, and bending down, she kissed the king's knees and his hands, and her golden hair fell all about her and upon the king's lap. But Darius rose impatiently, and left her kneeling by the couch. He was already angry with himself for having forgiven her, and he hated his own weakness bitterly.

"I will myself go hence at once with the guards, and I will take half the force from the fortress of Stakhar and go to Shushan, and thence, with the army that is there, I will be in Ecbatana in a few days. And I will utterly crush out these rebels who speak lies and do not

acknowledge me. Remain here, Zoroaster, and govern this province until I return in triumph."

Darius glanced once more at Atossa, who lay by the couch, half upon it and half upon the floor, seemingly dazed at what had occurred; and then he turned upon his heel and strode out of the room between the two spearmen of the guard, who raised their weapons as he passed, and followed him with a quick, rhythmical tread down the broad corridor outside.

Zoroaster was left alone with the queen.

As soon as Darius was gone, Atossa rose to her feet, and with all possible calmness proceeded to rearrange her disordered hair and to place her head-dress upon her head. Zoroaster stood and watched her; her hand trembled a little, but she seemed otherwise unmoved by what had occurred. She glanced up at him from under her eyelids as she stood with her head bent down and her hands raised, to arrange her hair.

"Why did you beg the king to spare my life?" she asked. "You, of all men, must wish me dead."

"I do not wish you dead," he answered coldly. "You have yet much evil to do in the world, but it will not be all evil. Neither did I need to intercede for you. Your time is not come, and though the king's hand were raised to strike you, it would not fall upon you, for you are fated to accomplish many things."

"Do you not hate me, Zoroaster?"

It was one of the queen's chief characteristics that she never attempted concealment when it could be of no use, and in such cases affected an almost brutal frankness. She almost laughed as she asked the question—it seemed so foolish, and yet she asked it.

"I do not hate you," answered the priest. "You are beneath hatred."

"And I presume you are far above it?" she said very scornfully, and eyed him in silence for a moment. "You are a poor creature," she pursued, presently. "I heartily despise you. You suffered yourself to be deceived by a mere trick; you let the woman you loved go from you with-

out an effort to keep her. You might have been a queen's lover, and you despised her. And now, when you could have the woman who did you a mortal injury be led forth to death before your eyes, you interceded for her and saved her life. You are a fool. I despise you."

"I rejoice that you do," returned Zoroaster coldly. "I would not have your admiration, if I might be paid for receiving it with the whole world and the wisdom thereof."

"Not even if you might have for your wife the woman you loved in your poor, insipid way—but you loved her nevertheless? She is pale and sorrowful, poor creature; she haunts the gardens like the shadow of death; she wearies the king with her wan face. She is eating her heart out for you—the king took her from you, you could take her from him to-morrow, if you pleased. The greater your folly, because you do not. As for her, her foolishness is such that she would follow you to the ends of the earth—poor girl! she little knows what a pale, wretched,

sapless thing you have in your breast for a heart."

But Zoroaster gazed calmly at the queen in quiet scorn at her scoffing.

"Think you that the sun is obscured, because you can draw yonder curtain before your window and keep out his rays?" he asked. "Think you that the children of light feel pain because the children of darkness say in their ignorance that there is no light?"

"You speak in parables—having nothing plain to say," returned the queen, thrusting a golden pin through her hair at the back and through the folds of her linen tiara. But she felt Zoroaster's eyes upon her, and looking up, she was fascinated by the strange light in them. She strove to look away from him, but could not. Suddenly her heart sank within her. She had heard of Indian charmers and of Chaldean necromancers and wise men, who could perform wonders and slay their enemies with a glance. She struggled to take her eyes from his, but it was of no use. The

subtle power of the universal agent had got hold upon her, and she was riveted to the spot so long as he kept his eyes upon her. He spoke again, and his voice seemed to come to her with a deafening metallic force, as though it vibrated to her very brain.

“You may scoff at me; shield yourself from me, if you can,” said Zoroáster. “Lift one hand, if you are able—make one step from me, if you have the strength. You cannot; you are altogether in my power. If I would, I could kill you as you stand, and there would be no mark of violence upon you, that a man should be able to say you were slain. You boast of your strength and power. See, you follow the motion of my hand, as a dog would. See, you kneel before me, and prostrate yourself in the dust at my feet, at my bidding. Lie there, and think well whether you are able to scoff any more. You kneeled to the king of your own will; you kneel to me at mine, and though you had the strength of a hundred men, you must kneel there till I bid you rise.”

The queen was wholly under the influence of the terrible power Zoroaster possessed. She was no more able to resist his will than a drowning man can resist the swift torrent that bears him down to his death. She lay at the priest's feet, helpless and nerveless. He gazed at her for a moment as she crouched before him.

"Rise," he said, "go your way, and remember me."

Relieved from the force of the subtle influence he projected, Atossa sprang to her feet and staggered back a few paces, till she fell upon the couch.

"What manner of man art thou?" she said, staring wildly before her, as though recovering from some heavy blow that had stunned her.

But she saw Zoroaster's white robes disappear through the door, even while the words were on her lips, and she sank back in stupefaction upon the cushions of the couch.

Meanwhile the trumpets sounded in the courts of the palace and the guards were marshalled out

at the king's command. Messengers mounted and rode furiously up the valley to the fortress, to warn the troops there to make ready for the march; and before the sun reached the meridian, Darius was on horseback, in his armour, at the foot of the great staircase. The blazing noonday light shone upon his polished helmet and on the golden wings that stood out on either side of it, and the hot rays were sent flashing back from his gilded harness, and from the broad scales of his horse's armour.

The slaves of the palace stood in long ranks before the columns of the portico and upon the broad stairs on each side, and Zoroaster stood on the lowest step, attended by a score of his priests, to receive the king's last instructions.

"I go forth, and in two months I will return in triumph," said Darius. "Meanwhile keep thou the government in thy hand, and let not the laws be relaxed because the king is not here. Let the sacrifice be performed daily in the temple, and let all things proceed as though I myself were

present. I will not that petty strifes arise because I am away. There shall be peace—peace—peace for ever throughout my kingdom, though I shed much blood to obtain it. And all the people who are evildoers and makers of strife and sedition shall tremble at the name of Darius, the king of kings, and of Zoroaster, the high priest of the All-Wise. In peace I leave you, to cause peace whither I go; and in peace I will come again to you. Farewell, Zoroaster, truest friend and wisest counsellor; in thy keeping I leave all things. Take thou the signet and bear it wisely till I come.”

Zoroaster received the royal ring and bowed a low obeisance. Then Darius pressed his knees to his horse's sides and the noble steed sprang forward upon the straight, broad road, like an arrow from a bow. The mounted guards grasped their spears and gathered their bridles in their hands and followed swiftly, four and four, shoulder to shoulder, and knee to knee, their bronze cuirasses and polished helmets blazing in the noonday sun

and clashing as they galloped on ; and in a moment there was nothing seen of the royal guard but a tossing wave of light far up the valley ; and the white dust, that had risen as they plunged forward, settled slowly in the still, hot air upon the roses and shrubs that hung over the enclosure of the garden at the foot of the broad staircase.

Zoroaster gazed for a moment on the track of the swift warriors ; then went up the steps, followed by his priests, and entered the palace.

Atossa and Nehushta had watched the departure of the king from their upper windows, at the opposite ends of the building, from behind the gilded lattices. Atossa had recovered somewhat from the astonishment and fear that had taken possession of her when she had found herself under Zoroaster's strange influence, and as she saw Darius ride away, while Zoroaster remained standing upon the steps, her courage rose. She resolved that nothing should induce her again to expose herself to the chief priest's unearthly power, and she laughed to herself as she thought

that she might yet destroy him, and free herself from him for ever. She wondered how she could ever have given a thought of love to such a man, and she summoned her black slave, and sent him upon his last errand, by which he was to obtain his freedom.

But Nehushta gazed sadly after the galloping guards, and her eye strove to distinguish the king's crest before the others, till all was mingled in the distance, in an indiscriminate reflection of moving light, and then lost to view altogether in the rising dust. Whether she loved him truly, or loved him not, he had been true and kind to her, and had rested his dark head upon her shoulder that very morning before he went, and had told her that, of all living women, he loved her best. But she had felt a quick sting of pain in her heart, because she knew that she would give her life to lie for one short hour on Zoroaster's breast and sob out all her sorrow and die.

CHAPTER IX.

FOUR days after the king's departure, Nehushta was wandering in the gardens as the sun was going down, according to her daily custom. There was a place she loved well—a spot where the path widened to a circle, round which the roses grew, thick and fragrant with the breath of the coming summer, and soft green shrubs and climbing things that twisted their tender arms about the myrtle trees. The hedge was so high that it cut off all view of the gardens beyond, and only the black north-western hills could just be seen above the mass of shrubbery ; beyond the mountains and all over the sky, the glow of the setting sun spread like a rosy veil ; and the light tinged the crests of the dark hills and turned the myrtle leaves to a strange colour, and gilded the highest roses to a deep red gold.

The birds were all singing their evening song in loud, happy chorus, as only Eastern birds can sing; the air was warm and still, and the tiny gnats chased each other with lightning quickness in hazy swarms overhead, in the reflected glow.

Nehushta loved the little open space, for it was there that, a year ago, she had sent for Zoroaster to come to her that she might tell him she knew the truth at last. She stood still and listened to the singing of the birds, gazing upwards at the glowing sky, where the red was fast turning to purple; she breathed in the warm air and sighed softly; wishing, as she wished every night, that the sunset might fade to darkness, and there might be no morning for her any more.

She had lived almost entirely alone since Darius had gone to Shushan; she avoided Atossa, and she made no effort to see Zoroaster, who was entirely absorbed by the management of the affairs of the state. In the king's absence there were no banquets, as there used to be when he was in the palace, and the two queens were free to

lead whatever life seemed best to them, independently of each other and of the courtiers. Atossa had chosen to shut herself up in the seclusion of her own apartments, and Nehushta rarely left her own part of the palace until the evening. But when the sun was low, she loved to linger among the roses in the garden, till the bright shield of the moon was high in the east, or till the faint stars burned in their full splendour, and the nightingales began to call and trill their melancholy song from end to end of the sweet valley.

So she stood on this evening, looking up into the sky, and her slaves waited her pleasure at a little distance. But while she gazed, she heard quick steps along the walk, and the slave-women sprang aside to let some one pass. Nehushta turned and found herself face to face with Atossa, who stood before her, wrapped in a dark mantle, a white veil of Indian gauze wound about her head, and half-concealing her face. It was a year since they had met in private, and Nehushta

drew herself suddenly to her height, and the old look of scorn came over her dark features. She would have asked haughtily what brought Atossa there, but the fair queen was first in her speech. There was hardly even the affectation of friendliness in her tones, as she stood there alone and unattended, facing her enemy.

"I came to ask if you wished to go with me," said Atossa.

"Where? Why should I go with you?"

"I am weary of the palace. I think I will go to Shushan to be nearer the king. To-night I will rest at the fortress."

Nehushta stared coldly at the fair woman, muffled in her cloak and veil.

"What is it to me whether you go to the ends of the earth, or whether you remain here?" she asked.

"I wished to know whether you desired to accompany me, else I should not have asked you the question. I feared that you might be lonely here in Stakhar—will you not come?"

"Again I say, why do you ask me? What have I to do with you?" returned Nehushta, drawing her mantle about her as though to leave Atossa.

"If the king were here, he would bid you go," said Atossa, looking intently upon her enemy.

"It is for me to judge what the king would wish me to do—not for you. Leave me in peace. Go your way if you will—it is nothing to me."

"You will not come?" Atossa's voice softened and she smiled serenely. Nehushta turned fiercely upon her.

"No! If you are going—go! I want you not!"

"You are glad I am going, are you not?" asked Atossa, gently.

"I am glad—with a gladness only you can know. I would you were already gone!"

"You rejoice that I leave you alone with your lover. It is very natural——"

"My lover!" cried Nehushta, her wrath rising and blazing in her eyes.

"Ay, your lover! the thin, white-haired priest, that once was Zoroaster—your old lover—your poor old lover!"

Nehushta steadied herself for a moment. She felt as though she must tear this woman in pieces. But she controlled her anger by a great effort, though she was nearly choking as she drew herself up and answered.

"I would that the powers of evil, of whom you are, might strangle the thrice-accursed lie in your false throat!" she said, in low fierce tones, and turned away.

Still Atossa stood there, smiling as ever. Nehushta looked back as she reached the opposite end of the little plot.

"Are you not yet gone? Shall I bid my slaves take you by the throat and force you from me?" But, as she spoke, she looked beyond Atossa, and saw that a body of dark men and women stood in the path. Atossa had not come unprotected.

"I see you are the same foolish woman you

ever were," answered the elder queen. Just then, a strange sound echoed far off among the hills above, strange and far as the scream of a distant vulture calling its mate to the carrion feast—an unearthly cry that rang high in the air from side to side of the valley, and struck the dark crags and doubled in the echo, and died away in short, faint pulsations of sound upon the startled air.

Nehushta started slightly. It might have been the cry of a wolf, or of some wild beast prowling upon the heights, but she had never heard such a sound before. But Atossa showed no surprise, and her smile returned to her lips more sweetly than ever—those lips that had kissed three kings, and that had never spoken truly a kind or a merciful word to living man, or child, or woman.

"Farewell, Nehushta," she said, "if you will not come, I will leave you to yourself—and to your lover. I daresay he can protect you from harm. Heard you that sound? It is the cry of your fate. Farewell, foolish girl, and may every

undreamed-of quality of evil attend you to your dying day——”

“Go!” cried Nehushta, turning and pointing to the path with a gesture of terrible anger. Atossa moved back a little.

“It is no wonder I linger awhile—I thought you were past suffering. If I had time, I might yet find some way of tormenting you—you are very foolish——”

Nehushta walked rapidly forward upon her, as though to do her some violence with her own hands. But Atossa, as she gave way before the angry Hebrew woman, drew from beneath her mantle the Indian knife she had once taken from her. Nehushta stopped short, as she saw the bright blade thrust out against her bosom. But Atossa held it up one moment, and then threw it down upon the grass at her feet.

“Take it!” she cried, and in her voice, that had been so sweet and gentle a moment before, there suddenly rang out a strange defiance and a bitter wrath. “Take what is yours—I loathe it,

for it smells of you—and you, and all that is yours, I loathe and hate and scorn !”

She turned with a quick movement and disappeared amongst her slaves, who closed in their ranks behind her, and followed her rapidly down the path. Nehushta remained standing upon the grass, peering after her retreating enemy through the gloom ; for the glow had faded from the western sky while they had been speaking, and it was now dusk.

Suddenly, as she stood, almost transfixed with the horror of her fearful anger, that strange cry rang again through the lofty crags and crests of the mountains, and echoed and died away.

Nehushta's slave-women, who had hung back in fear and trembling during the altercation between the two queens, came forward and gathered about her.

“What is it ?” asked the queen in a low voice, for her own heart beat with the anticipation of a sudden danger. “It is the cry of your fate,” Atossa had said—verily it sounded like the scream of a coming death.

"It is the Druksh of the mountains!" said one.

"It is the howling of wolves," said another, a Median woman from the Zagros mountains.

"The war-cry of the children of Anak is like that," said a little Syrian maid, and her teeth chattered with fear.

As they listened, crouching and pressing about their royal mistress in their terror, they heard below in the road, the sound of horses and men moving quickly past the foot of the gardens. It was Atossa and her train, hurrying along the highway in the direction of the fortress.

Nehushta suddenly pushed the slaves aside, and fled down the path towards the palace, and the dark women hurried after. One of them stooped and picked up the Indian knife and hid it in her bosom as she ran.

The whole truth had flashed across Nehushta's mind in an instant. Some armed force was collecting upon the hills to descend in a body upon the palace, to accomplish her destruction.

Atossa had fled to a place of safety, after enjoying the pleasure of tormenting her doomed enemy to the last moment, well knowing that no power would induce Nehushta to accompany her. But one thought filled Nehushta's mind in her instantaneous comprehension of the truth; she must find Zoroaster, and warn him of the danger. They would have time to fly together, yet. Atossa must have known how to time her flight, since the plot was hers, and she had not yet been many minutes upon the road.

Through the garden she ran, and up the broad steps to the portico. Slaves were moving about under the colonnade, leisurely lighting the great torches that burned there all night. They had not heard the strange cries from the hills; or, hearing only a faint echo, had paid no attention to the sound.

Nehushta paused, breathless with running. As she realised the quiet that reigned in the palace, where the slaves went about their duties as though nothing had occurred, or were likely to

occur, it seemed to her as though she must have been dreaming. It was impossible that if there were any real danger, it should not have become known at least to some one of the hundreds of slaves who thronged the outer halls and corridors. Moreover there were numerous scribes and officers connected with the government; some few nobles whom Darius had left behind when he went to Shushan; there were their wives and families residing in various parts of the palace and in the buildings below it, and there was a strong detachment of Persian guards. If there were danger, some one must have known it.

She did not know that at that moment the inhabitants of the lower palace were already alarmed, while some were flying, leaving everything behind, in their haste to reach the fortress higher up the valley. Everything seemed quiet where she was, and she determined to go alone in search of Zoroaster, without raising any alarm. Just as she entered the doorway of the great hall, she heard the cry again echoing behind her

through the valley. It was as much as she could do to control the terror that again took hold of her at the dreaded sound, as she passed the files of bowing slaves, and went in between the two tall spearmen who guarded the inner entrance, and grounded their spears with military precision as she went by.

She had one slave whom she trusted more than the rest. It was the little Syrian maid, who was half a Hebrew.

"Go," she said quickly, in her own tongue. "Go in one direction and I will go in another; and search out Zoroaster, the high priest, and bring him to my chamber. I also will search, but if I find him not, I will wait for thee there."

The dark girl turned and ran through the halls, swift as a startled fawn, to fulfil her errand, and Nehushta went another way upon her search. She was ashamed to ask for Zoroaster. The words of her enemy were still ringing in her ears—"alone with your lover;" it might be the common talk of the court for all she knew. She

went silently on her way. She knew where Zoroaster dwelt. The curtain of his simple chamber was thrown aside and a faint light burned in the room. It was empty; a scroll lay open upon the floor beside a purple cushion, as he had left it, and his long white mantle lay tossed upon the couch which served him for a bed.

She gazed lovingly for one moment into the open chamber, and then went on through the broad corridor, dimly lighted everywhere with small oil lamps. She looked into the council chamber and it was deserted. The long rows of double seats were empty, and gleamed faintly in the light. High upon the dais at the end, a lamp burned above the carved chair of ivory and gold, whereon the king sat when the council was assembled. There was no one there. Farther on, the low entrance to the treasury was guarded by four spearmen, whose arms clanged upon the floor as the queen passed. But she saw that the massive bolts and the huge square locks upon them were in their places. There was no one within.

In the colonnade beyond, a few nobles stood talking carelessly together, waiting for their evening meal to be served them in a brightly illuminated hall, of which the doors stood wide open to admit the cool air of the coming night. The magnificently-arrayed courtiers made a low obeisance and then stood in astonishment as the queen went by. She held up her head and nodded to them, trying to look as though nothing disturbed her.

On and on she went through the whole wing, till she came to her own apartment. Not so much as one white-robed priest had she seen upon all her long search. Zoroaster was certainly not in the portion of the palace through which she had come. Entering her own chambers, she looked round for the little Syrian maid, but she had not returned.

Unable to bear the suspense any longer, she hastily despatched a second slave in search of the chief priest—a Median woman, who had been with her in Ecbatana.

It seemed as though the minutes were lengthened to hours. Nehushta sat with her hands pressed to her temples, that throbbed as though the fever would burst her brain, and the black fan-girl plied the palm-leaf with all her might, thinking that her mistress suffered from the heat. The other women she dismissed; and she sat waiting beneath the soft light of the perfumed lamp, the very figure and incarnation of anxiety.

Something within her told her that she was in great and imminent danger, and the calm she had seen in the palace could not allay in her mind the terror of that unearthly cry she had heard three times from the hills. As she thought of it, she shuddered, and the icy fear seemed to run through all her limbs, chilling the marrow in her bones, and freezing her blood suddenly in its mad course.

"Left alone with your lover"—"it is the cry of your fate"—Atossa's words kept ringing in her ears like a knell—the knell of a shameful

death; and as she went over the bitter taunts of her enemy, her chilled pulses beat again more feverishly than before. She could not bear to sit still, but rose and paced the room in intense agitation. Would they never come back, those dallying slave-women?

The fan-girl tried to follow her mistress, and her small red eyes watched cautiously every one of Nehushta's movements. But the queen waved her off and the slave went and stood beside the chair where she had sat, her fan hanging idly in her hand. At that moment, the Median woman entered the chamber.

"Where is he?" asked Nehushta, turning suddenly upon her.

The woman made a low obeisance and answered in trembling tones:—

"They say that the high priest left the palace two hours ago, with the queen Atossa. They say——"

"Thou liest!" cried Nehushta vehemently, and her face turned white, as she stamped her

foot upon the black marble pavement. The woman sprang back with a cry of terror, and ran towards the door. She had never seen her mistress so angry. But Nehushta called her back.

"Come hither—what else do they say?" she asked, controlling herself as best she could.

"They say that the wild riders of the eastern desert are descending from the hills," answered the slave hurriedly and almost under her breath. "Every one is flying—everything is in confusion—I hear them even now, hurrying to and fro in the courts, the soldiers——"

But, even as she spoke, an echo of distant voices and discordant cries came through the curtains of the door from without, the rapid, uneven tread of people running hither and thither in confusion, the loud voices of startled men and the screams of frightened women—all blending together in a wild roar that grew every moment louder.

Just then, the little Syrian maid came running

in, almost tearing the curtains from their brazen rods as she thrust the hangings aside. She came and fell breathless at Nehushta's feet and clasped her knees.

"Fly, fly, beloved mistress," she cried, "the devils of the mountains are upon us—they cover the hills—they are closing every entrance—the people in the lower palace are all slain——"

"Where is Zoroaster?" In the moment of supreme danger, Nehushta grew calm, and her senses were restored to her again.

"He is in the temple with the priests—by this time he is surely slain—he could know of nothing that is going on—fly, fly!" cried the poor Syrian girl in an agony of terror.

Nehushta laid her hand kindly upon the head of the little maid, and turning in the pride of her courage, now that she knew the worst, she spoke calmly to the other slaves who thronged in from the outer hall, some breathless with fear, others screaming in an agony of acute dread.

"On which side are they coming?" she asked.

"From the hills, from the hills they are descending in thousands," cried half a dozen of the frightened women at once, the rest huddled together like sheep, moaning in their fear.

"Go you all to the farther window," cried Nehushta, in commanding tones. "Leap down upon the balcony—it is scarce a man's height—follow it to the end and past the corner where it joins the main wall of the garden. Run along upon the wall till you find a place where you can descend. Through the gardens you can easily reach the road by the northern gate. Fly and save yourselves in the darkness. You will reach the fortress before dawn if you hasten. You will hasten," she added with something of disdain in her voice, for before she had half uttered her directions, the last of the slave-women, mad with terror, disappeared through the open window, and she could hear them drop, one after the other, in quick succession upon the marble balcony below. She was alone.

But, looking down, she saw at her feet the

little Syrian maid, looking with imploring eyes to her face.

“Why do you not go with the rest?” asked Nehushta, stooping down and laying one hand upon the girl’s shoulder.

“I have eaten thy bread—shall I leave thee in the hour of death?” asked the little slave, humbly. “Go, child,” replied Nehushta, very kindly. “I have seen thy devotion and truth—thou must not perish.”

But the Syrian leaped to her feet, and there was pride in her small face, as she answered :

“I am a bondwoman, but I am a daughter of Israel, even as thou art. Though all the others leave thee, I will not. It may be I can help thee.”

“Thou art a brave child,” said Nehushta ; and she drew the girl to her and pressed her kindly. “I must go to Zoroaster—stay thou here, hide thyself among the curtains—escape by the window, if any come to harm thee.” She turned and went rapidly out between the curtains, as calm and as pale as death.

The din in the palace had partially subsided, and new and strange cries re-echoed through the vast halls and corridors. An occasional wild scream—a momentary distant crash as of a door breaking down and thundering upon the marble pavement; and then again, the long, strange cries, mingled with a dull, low sound as of a great moaning—all came up together, and seemed to meet Nehushta as she lifted the curtains and went out.

But the little Syrian maid grasped the Indian knife in her girdle, and stole stealthily upon her mistress's steps.

CHAPTER X.

NEHUSHTA glided like a ghost along the corridors and dimly-lighted halls. As yet, the confusion seemed to be all in the lower story of the palace, but the roaring din rose louder every moment—the shrieks of wounded women with the moaning of wounded men, the clash of swords and arms, and, occasionally, a quick, loud rattle, as half a dozen arrows that had missed their mark struck the wall together.

Onward she flew, not pausing to listen, lest in a moment more the tide of fight should be forced up the stairs and overtake her. She shuddered as she passed the head of the great staircase and heard, as though but a few steps from her, a wild shriek that died suddenly into a gurgling death hiss.

She passed the treasury, whence the guards had fled, and in a moment more she was above the staircase that led down to the temple behind the palace. There was no one there as yet, as far as she could see in the starlight. The doors were shut, and the massive square building frowned through the gloom, blacker than its own black shadow.

Nehushta paused as she reached the door, and listened. Very faintly through the thick walls she could hear the sound of the evening chant. The priests were all within with Zoroaster, unconscious of their danger and of all that was going on in the palace, singing the hymns of the sacrifice before the sacred fire,—chanting, as it were, a dirge for themselves. Nehushta tried the door. The great bronze gates were locked together, and though she pushed with her whole strength, they would not move a hair's breadth.

"Press the nail nearest the middle," said a small voice behind her. Nehushta started and looked round. It was the little Syrian slave,

who had followed her out of the palace, and stood watching her in the dark. Nehushta put her hand upon the round head of the nail and pressed, as the slave told her to do. The door opened, turning slowly and noiselessly upon its hinges. Both women entered; the Syrian girl looked cautiously back and pushed the heavy bronze back to its place. The Egyptian artisan who had made the lock, had told one of the queen's women whom he loved the secret by which it was opened, and the Syrian had heard it repeated and remembered it.

Once inside, Nehushta ran quickly through the corridor between the walls and, rushing into the inner temple, found herself behind the screen, and in a moment more she stood before all the priests and before Zoroaster himself. But even as she entered, the Syrian slave, who had lingered to close the gates, heard the rushing of many feet outside, and the yelling of hoarse voices, mixed with the clang of arms.

Solemnly the chant rose around the sacred fire

that seemed to burn by unearthly means upon the black stone altar. Zoroaster stood before it, his hands lifted in prayer, and his waxen face and snow-white beard illuminated by the dazzling effulgence.

The seventy priests, in even rank, stood around the walls, their hands raised in like manner as their chief priest's; their voices going up in a rich chorus, strong and tuneful, in the grand plain-chant. But Nehushta broke upon their melody, with a sudden cry, as she rushed before them.

"Zoroaster—fly—there is yet time. The enemy are come in thousands—they are in the palace. There is barely time!" As she cried to him and to them all, she rushed forward and laid one hand upon his shoulder.

But the high priest turned calmly upon her, his face unmoved, although all the priests ceased their chanting and gathered about their chief in sudden fear. As their voices ceased, a low roar was heard from without, as though the ocean were beating at the gates.

Zoroaster gently took Nehushta's hand from his shoulder.

"Go thou, and save thyself," he said kindly. "I will not go. If it be the will of the All-Wise that I perish, I will perish before this altar. Go thou quickly, and save thyself while there is yet time."

But Nehushta took his hand in hers, that trembled with the great emotion, and gazed into his calm eyes as he spoke—her look was very loving and very sad.

"Knowest thou not, Zoroaster, that I would rather die with thee than live with any other? I swear to thee, by the God of my fathers, I will not leave thee." Her soft voice trembled—for she was uttering her own sentence of death.

"There is no more time!" cried the voice of the little Syrian maid, as she came running into the temple. "There is no more time! Ye are all dead men! Behold, they are breaking down the doors!"

As she spoke, the noise of some heavy mass

striking against the bronze gates echoed like thunder through the temple, and at each blow a chorus of hideous yells rose, wild and long-drawn-out, as though the fiends of hell were screaming in joy over the souls of the lost.

The priests drew together, trembling with fear, brave and devoted though they were. Some of them would have run towards the door, but the Syrian maid stood before them.

"Ye are dead men and there is no salvation—ye must die like men," said the little maid, quietly. "Let me go to my mistress." And she pushed through the crowd of white-robed men, who surged together in their sudden fear, like a white-crested wave heaved up from the deep by a fierce wind.

Nehushta still held Zoroaster's hand and stared wildly upon the helpless priests. Her one thought was to save the man she loved, but she saw well enough that it was too late. Nevertheless she appealed to the priests.

"Can none of you save him?" she cried.

Foremost in the little crowd was a stern, dark man—the same who had been the high priest before Zoroaster came, the same who had first hurled defiance at the intruder, and then had given him his whole allegiance. He spoke out loudly :

“We will save him and thee if we are able,” he cried in brave enthusiasm for his chief. “We will take you between us and open the doors, and it may be that we can fight our way out—though we are all slain, he may be saved.” He would have laid hold on Zoroaster, and there was not one of the priests who would not have laid down his life in the gallant attempt. But Zoroaster gently put him back.

“Ye cannot save me, for my hour is come,” he said, and a radiance of unearthly glory stole upon his features, so that he seemed transfigured and changed before them all. “The foe are as a thousand men against one. Here we must die like men, and like priests of the Lord before His altar.”

The thundering at the doors continued to echo

through the whole temple, almost drowning every other sound as it came; and the yells of the infuriated besiegers rose louder and louder between.

Zoroaster's voice rang out clear and strong and the band of priests gathered more and more closely about him. Nehushta still held his hand tightly between her own, and, pale as death, she looked up to him as he spoke. The little Syrian girl stood beside her mistress, very quiet and grave.

"Hear me, ye priests of the Lord," said Zoroaster. "We are doomed men and must surely die, though we know not by whose hand we perish. Now, therefore, I beseech you to think not of this death which we must suffer in our mortal bodies, but to open your eyes to the things which are not mortal and which perish not eternally. For man is but a frail and changing creature as regards his mortality, seeing that his life is not longer than the lives of other created things, and he is delicate and sickly and exposed to manifold dangers from his birth. But the soul of man dieth not,

neither is there any taint of death in it, but it liveth for ever and is made glorious above the stars. For the stars, also, shall have an end, and the earth—even as our bodies must end here this night; but our souls shall see the glory of God, the All-Wise, and shall live.

“The sun riseth and the earth is made glad, and it is day; and again he setteth and it is night, and the whole earth is sorrowful. But though our sun is gone down and we shall see him rise no more, yet shall we see a sun which setteth not for ever, and of whose gladness there is no end. The morning cometh, after which there shall be no evening. The Lord Ahura Mazda, who made all things, made also these our bodies, and put us in them to live and move and have being for a space on earth. And now he demands them again; for he gave them and they are his. Let us give them readily as a sacrifice, for he who knoweth all things, knoweth also why it is meet that we should die. And he who hath created all things which we see and which

perish quickly, hath created also the things which we have not seen, but shall see hereafter;—and the time is at hand when our eyes shall be opened to the world which endureth, though they be closed in death upon the things which perish. Raise then a hymn of thanks with me to the All-Wise God, who is pleased to take us from time into eternity, from darkness into light, from change to immortality, from death by death to life undying.

*“ Praise we the All-Wise God, who hath made
and created the years and the ages ;*

*Praise him who in the heavens hath sown and
hath scattered the seed of the stars ;*

*Praise him who moves between the three ages that
are, and that have been, and shall be ;*

*Praise him who rides on death, in whose hand
are all power and honour and glory ;*

*Praise him who made what seemeth, the image
of living, the shadow of life ;*

*Praise him who made what is, and hath made
it eternal for ever and ever,*

*Who made the days and nights, and created the
darkness to follow the light,
Who made the day of life, that should rise up
and lighten the shadow of death."* /

Zoroaster raised one hand to heaven as he chanted the hymn, and all the priests sang with him in calm and holy melody, as though death were not even then with them. But Nehushta still held his other hand fast, and her own were icy cold.

With a crash, as though the elements of the earth were dissolving into primeval confusion, the great bronze doors gave way, and fell clanging in—and the yells of the besiegers came to the ears of the priests, as though the cover had been taken from the caldron of hell, suffering the din of the damned and their devils to burst forth in demoniac discord.

In an instant the temple was filled with a swarm of hideous men, whose eyes were red with the lust of blood and their hands with slaughter. Their crooked swords gleamed aloft as they pressed

forward in the rush, and their yells rent the very roof.

They had hoped for treasure,—they saw but a handful of white-robed unarmed men, standing around one taller than the rest; and in the throng they saw two women. Their rage knew no bounds, and their screams rose more piercing than ever, as they surrounded the dogged band, and overwhelmed them, and dyed their misshapen blades in the crimson blood that flowed so red and strong over the fair white vestures.

The priests struggled like brave men to the last. They grasped their hideous foes by arm and limb and neck, and tossed some of them back upon their fellows; fighting desperately with their bare hands against the armed murderers. But the foe were a hundred to one, and the priests fell in heaps upon each other while the blood flowed out between the feet of the wild, surging throng, who yelled and slew, and yelled again, as each priest tottered back and fell, with the death-wound in his breast.

At last, one tall wretch, with blood-red eyes and distorted features, leaped across a heap of slain and laid hold of Nehushta by the hair with his pecking hand, and strove to drag her out. But Zoroaster's thin arms went round her like lightning and clasped her to his breast. Then the little Syrian maid raised her Indian knife, with both hands, high above her head, and smote the villain with all her might beneath the fifth rib, that he died in the very act; but ere he had fallen, a sharp blade fell swiftly, like a crooked flash of light, and severed the small hands at the wrist; and the brave, true-hearted little maid fell shrieking to the floor. One shriek—and that was all; for the same sword smote her again as she lay, and so she died.

But Nehushta's head fell forward on the high priest's breast, and her arms clasped him wildly as his clasped her.

“Oh, Zoroaster, my beloved, my beloved! Say not any more that I am unfaithful, for I have been faithful even unto death, and I shall be with you beyond the stars for ever!”

He pressed her closer still, and in that awful moment, his white face blazed with the radiant light of the new life that comes by death alone.

"Beyond the stars and for ever!" he cried.
"In the light of the glory of God most high!"

The keen sword flashed out once more and severed Nehushta's neck, and found its sheath in her lover's heart; and they fell down dead together, and the slaughter was done.

But on the third day, Darius the king returned; for a messenger met him, bringing news that his soldiers had slain the rebels in Ecbatana, though they were ten to one. And when he saw what things had been done in Stakhar, and looked upon the body of the wife he had loved, lying clasped in the arms of his most faithful and beloved servant, he wept most bitterly. And he rode forth and destroyed utterly the wild riders of the eastern hills, and left not one child to weep for its father that was dead. But two thousand of them he brought to Stakhar, and crucified them all upon the roadside, that their

blood might avenge the blood of those he had loved so well.

And he took the bodies of Zoroaster the high priest, and of Nehushta the queen, and of the little Syrian maid, and he buried them with spices and fine linen, and in plates of pure gold, together in a tomb over against the palace, hewn in the rock of the mountain.

THE END.



